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Dy. Military Secy. to the Governor-General.

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AH, PROMISED LAND!

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Here is a novel in the grand tradition of English romantic storytelling. It has a plot and a gallery of living and lovable characters; it is aglow with colour and full of incident; it is an escape from the world of every day and has the classic appeal to the child in every adult. Uncle Erasmus struck gold and sold out for a mountain of sovereigns. By lonely campfire and tramping the bush he had come to the knowledge that the world faced a quarter of a century of war and misery. And so he bought a schooner and gathering together a band of people he took them away from our world into the blue of the Pacific. By Act of God they did not reach Tonga, but found instead a new sub-tropical isle of pines instead of palms. They escaped just in time. Through all the troubled years of our generation they worked out their destinies behind the moat of sea, but even so the wars touched them.

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AH, PROMISED LAND!

BY

DALE COLLINS

Author of

"Ordeal," "The Haven," "The Sentimentalists,"

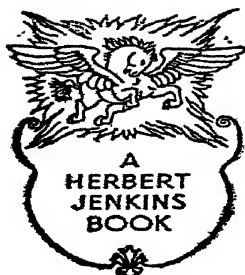
"Far-Off Strands," "Bright Vista,"

"Utility Baby," etc.

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For KATHLEEN
Who created the Oasis
in a Dreary World
Where this Happy Book
Could be written.

THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN
COMPLETE CONFORMITY WITH THE
AUTHORIZED ECONOMY STANDARDS

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*All the characters in this book are imaginary and have
no relation whatsoever to any living person*

BOOK ONE
THE VOYAGE—1914

CHAPTER I

I

THE scene was brighter, more vivid, more colourful than any picture postcard, even the sixpenny hand-painted ones with the golden edges, even the one of Niagara with the falls encrusted with little chips of diamonds. So it seemed to me then as a boy of thirteen, and all the years between have not dimmed a shade or blurred a line.

It was high summer. Through the golden heat of late afternoon crept a small breeze, just strong enough to fill the new sails—sails as white and clean as the feathers of the gulls which shrilled and hovered above us, looking down with bright expectant eyes, taking us no doubt for some mere fishing vessel instead of the ship of romance and adventure which we were. Buoyant and light as a duck, the schooner had ridden over the smooth swells which bulged up between the sky-touching cliffs of Sydney Heads, and now stole quietly across the vast blue plain of the Pacific, while the continent of Australia drifted away astern, taking with it all our lives until then. The bowsprit quivering slightly up and down was an urgent finger pointing on to all the new things which my Uncle Erasmus had bought for us with his beautiful shiny new sovereigns.

For my Uncle Erasmus would have no truck with the paper money of banks. For twenty years through the length and breadth of Australia he had sought gold, defying hunger, thirst, loneliness, privation and Death itself to stop him, and he had struck gold at last, and gold was the stuff for him. He carried his sovereigns about in a worn leather bag, such as clerks use to take their lunches in when they go to work—not

all his gold, of course, for no man, perhaps not even a two-horse waggon, could have carried all my uncle's gold, but enough for whatever he might be about, whether it was buying the three-masted schooner he had renamed the *Quail*, or paying for a round of drinks in a dockside bar.

He was not afraid of being robbed, for he was afraid of nothing, but if he had been robbed it would not have mattered. My uncle was so rich that a bag of sovereigns was nothing to him. He was Erasmus Quail, who, after all the long years of seeking, had found the Daybreak Reef, which, they said, was richer than the wealth of Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie, richer than the mines of the Rand, richer than the mines of King Solomon.

Another man who had spent his grown life eating damper made from flour and water in an old frying-pan, drinking anything he was lucky enough to find in creek or waterhole, sleeping under the great stars in the worn grey blankets he unrolled from the heavy swag he carried over his shoulder, another man might have been overwhelmed by such fantastic fortune. Not so Uncle Erasmus. By solitary camp-fire and as he trudged the dusty plains and climbed the stubborn ranges, he had had much time for thought, and he was also a reader and carried with him his Bible and a few dear books which were as much a part of his modest equipment as his billy-can. There were long, long hours, when he meditated on the world and the people in it and the lives they led, on the far-off cities and the mighty nations and the countless sands of humanity which formed them. So that, when finally he struck rich he was not at all bewildered, but knew just what he wanted to do. That it was something which no other man in his shoes would want to do did not weigh with him at all. My uncle stood in his own shoes, very firmly, very surely.

So he had sold his reef to a great company, outright, cash on the nail, and his gold was ready-minted into that great mountain of shiny sovereigns, and here we all were aboard the thousand-ton schooner *Quail* heading out into the great empty globe of blue.

I stood by my little dove-grey, dove-quiet mother amidships in one of the sharp oblongs of cool shadow the sails flung on the white, scoured deck. We were watching the porpoises. They whizzed by through the clear depths like

blue-grey greased lightning, streams of silver bubbles flowing from them, pointed snouts thrusting on, seeming to look up at us with piggy eyes. Sometimes they darted to the surface, flashing out into the air, gleaming and gay, making rainbows. On the land I had never seen anything so eager and free and happy as these great fish. I had always thought the eagles sailing high heaven above the bush had the best of lives. But they were far and remote. I could almost have touched these smooth, romping, merry fellows. There could be nothing nicer than to be a porpoise.

Aunt Grace joined us. She wasn't my mother's sister at all. She wasn't even a relation. I suppose she was a lodger, and my mother had been glad enough of the extra money. But we never thought of her as anything so horrid as just a lodger. She had been with us since I could remember and we imagined her to be rich until Uncle Erasmus showed us what wealth meant. My mother loved her and she loved my mother. They were such a contrast those two, a primrose and a tulip. I loved Aunt Grace, too. She was the most beautiful thing in the world. For a grown-up lady Aunt Grace was quite small. Her hair was shiny black and her eyes glowed like opals, dark with specks of golden light in them. She looked loveliest in bright colours, like vivid red. When she laughed, which was most of the time, her teeth glistened very whitely, as if she had just been biting an apple. She was fashionably dressed, as she always was, and her taffeta frock rustled on the planks. She had long black lace gloves on, through which her white skin showed, and a round hat with a veil tied beneath her chin, as if she were going for a ride in a motor-car.

"Why, Mary, Mary dear," she said, "you're crying."

"I'm—I'm not," said my mother.

But when I looked up at her I saw she had been crying all the time when I thought she was watching the porpoises with me. Just crying quietly, so that I wouldn't know and stop enjoying myself.

"I wasn't exactly crying," said my mother, and I knew what she meant, but Aunt Grace laughed and said: "Well, you weren't exactly singing Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay either. Whatever is there to be sad about? This lovely day, this lovely bit of fun, this escape from the ruts back there——"

I say God bless Erasmus and may his shadow never grow less. Crying! I want to dance!" And she gave her skirts and petticoats a pretty swirl, looking gay and light as a feather.

My mother forgot she had been crying. She could never resist Aunt Grace. No one could. Aunt Grace had had ever so many offers of marriage. They were quite a boast with us. But she laughed at her suitors, and sent them away twirling their straw boaters in bewilderment, and yet somehow unable to be angry with her.

"You're right, darling," my mother said. "I am a goose. Only somehow this is such a big thing to be setting out on—such a crazy kind of thing. I trust Erasmus, of course, but I sometimes feel he doesn't live in the real world at all, and I always have. A widow with children has to. This is all so fantastic and extraordinary and hare-brained that I can't believe I've any right to be involved. I should just be plodding on. I can't accept that it's right for me. It's too big, too queer. For Erasmus—yes!—but for me and mine? It's different for you too, you gypsy. You've only yourself to think of. You've nothing really to lose——"

"I turned down the Commercial Bank," laughed Aunt Grace. She meant the manager who'd come courting her, and used to take her out driving on Sunday afternoons in his Oldsmobile, which, all the rest of us felt, was enough to turn any girl's head. He had a big black moustache, and we children used to call him Mr. Bicycle because of his handle-bars.

"You'd have done that, anyway, you thistledown," said my mother.

"I hope so," said Aunt Grace. "And as for you? But for Erasmus what kind of a future had you or the nippers? Lodgers, letting rooms, scraping and scratching, washing, ironing, living in a dreary suburb, the nippers going to the state school—a life sentence of dullness and monotony. And now, Mary-girl, look at yourself and your flock—whisked away by Uncle Croesus from all that, headed straight for the Promised Land."

"The Promised Land?" said my mother. "I wonder? I hope!"

She laid her hand on my head. It trembled a little. Suddenly I wanted to cry, for I could feel the love and the fear running into my skull through her finger-tips.

But I had no chance to cry, for the voice of my Uncle Erasmus boomed through the little world of the ship and took possession of it and us, so that you couldn't think of anything but him.

He had appeared at the rail of the low poop in the stern, behind him a sky of scarlet and gold for the sun was dropping down to be swallowed by Australia, now only a long smudged line drawn between heaven and water. He stood erect and broad and tall, the six feet six inches of him towering like a tree. Though I know now he was only forty, he looked to me the oldest man I had ever seen, and yet ageless somehow, too—outside time. Impossible to associate him with birth-days, or to imagine he had ever been, or ever would be, different.

The years had tanned his skin to leather, and in that frame his big, bold eyes were bluer even than sea or sky. His beak of a nose thrust out, questingly. The breeze ruffled his short, golden, curly hair and his great golden beard splayed from his jaws in twin forks which lifted up in challenge. Above the beard his strong moustache swept high on either end. His chest was a barrel, yet he had no paunch. A sculptor would have made a statue of him, standing erect and firm, muscular legs straddled apart—a golden man, a man of gold, against the gold of the sunset.

Now that he had escaped again from the irksome cities he wore a butcher's blue shirt and grey corduroy trousers, the trousers held up by a belt six inches broad which glittered with golden stars, stars of real gold replacing the brass ones he had worn in the old days, for Uncle Erasmus made no secret of his love for the metal he had bought with twenty years of his life.

If you could have imagined his beard and hair as white, he would have looked somehow like Moses in the engravings by Dalziel in our Bible. Only you couldn't imagine him any-way except as he was, and so he remained Uncle Erasmus, to my young eyes a splendid, godlike creature, dazzling as the sun.

"Aft," he boomed in his great voice. "Come aft, all you lubbers and all you ladies and all you brats. Come aft."

He was quite at home towering there, as if he had always owned a ship, talking like an old sailor.

We had learnt to obey during the brief days in which he was sweeping us together, and achieving miracles of organization with the magic of his office-bag of gold. We had been scattered about the deck, men and women talking, children playing, all still somewhat dazed, all—except the very youngest children—still living in a kind of dream, pinching ourselves secretly to see if we were awake. At Uncle Erasmus's bidding we dropped everything and trooped towards the stern, sailors and city people in their city clothes, old and young, men and women and children and babies sucking their thumbs. Only the pigs and cattle and sheep and hens were left behind in their pens, grunting and lowing and baaing and clucking through the sudden quiet, so that you had to grin, thinking how queer it was to have a farm out here at sea. But Uncle Erasmus had decreed there should be a farm, and he had opened his bag, and the farm was there.

"Is he drunk?" my mother asked, in a whisper I was not intended to hear. She was always a little afraid of Uncle Erasmus, being timid; like a dove.

"My dear," said Aunt Grace, pretending to be shocked. "What a question! What a most unseemly question! Anyway, how could he have made the time to drink as much rum as that would need?"

These exchanges seemed very silly to me, the hush, the suggestion of wickedness. If my uncle wanted to drink rum, or anything else, why shouldn't he? I felt a queer sense of superiority over Aunt Grace, and, yes, my mother. Not over them as such, of course, but because they were just women. Uncle Erasmus and I belonged, somehow, in a bigger, wider world. I pushed my chest out, and walked on a bit ahead of them.

The *Quail* slipped along, dipping and rising, swaying. Blocks and ropes creaked, and the sea slapped against the sides. Above the gulls cried. We gathered, respectful and quiet, on the main deck below Uncle Erasmus. He waited until all were still.

"My children, my tribe, my poor bewitched imbeciles," said my uncle, then, his voice slow and steady like the booming of a bell, "the adventure begins. You do not know these things yet, but to some of you what lies ahead is heaven and to some hell. But remember, little ones, life back there would

have held the same alternatives. With my gold, with my lovely gold"—he gave the two prongs of his beard a twist—"I am buying you new lives for old. I might have pensioned you, I might have forgotten you existed, I might have never known you existed, but instead I take you up in the palm of my hand, so"—he held out his vast, gnarled hand in a lifting motion, and all our knees gave slightly as if we stood in it—"and I am taking you to the Promised Land. What you do there is your affair and mine. I shall see to my side, you may count on that."

No sound from us, and I felt a shiver. He was Moses on the mountain in our Bible. Though his ways were just and wise, he would not spare us.

"These gifts I give you: a new life in a new world. Led not by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, but by me, Erasmus Quail, we sail for the Tonga Islands, known happily also as the Friendly Isles. I have had full inquiries made. We shall find there a home of palms and surf where it is always afternoon. But do not, pray, expect to be lotus-eaters. Do you know what I am talking about? I doubt it. The reference is to a poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, whose works have accompanied me for years past. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, wrote:

'Courage,' he said, and pointed towards the land,
'This mounting wave will roll us shoreward soon.'
In the afternoon they came unto a land
In which it seemed always afternoon.
All round the coast the languid air did swoon.

"And so on and so on, delightfully, but the ending is this:

And sweet it was to dream of Fatherland,
Of child and wife and slave; but evermore
Most weary seem'd the sea, weary the oar,
Weary the wandering fields of barren foam.
Then someone said, 'We will return no more';
And all at once they sang, 'Our island home
Is far beyond the wave; we will no longer roam.'

"That, dunderheads, is poetry, but I hope, even so, you

get the point. We will return no more. The journey I lead you on is one where there is no return ticket. When finally, under the guidance of God and me and in technical matters Captain Butterwick, we reach that island home—we will return no more. Get that into your skulls, and remember it.

"What do I give you in return? This: we escape from an evil and clouded world, doomed to great miseries. I say to you, on this twentieth day of January, in the year of grace nineteen hundred and fourteen, that I deliver you from war and pestilence, famine and misery. I have seen things in the quiet of the great night which neither you nor your former rulers have seen yet. I have seen the shadow of things to come—I have seen the bitter and black shadow of things to come. For half a century the world is done with peace. Nation shall fight nation in a manner beyond your belief—on the land, on the sea, and under the water and in the air. A million men will die, a million homes be broken, and a hundred countries will smoulder in flames and drown in blood.

"But we, we happy few, we band of brothers, we shall live at peace behind our moat of ocean. The wars will blaze and fade and blaze again and burn again and slay again, but we shall be safe and secure and at peace. This is the great gift I buy you with all my gold. I have lived long in the wilderness and I am wise. The Lord has opened my eyes. My wealth is not to be spent in the futilities of the world, but in allowing me and you—some flesh of my flesh, some friends, some mere acquaintances picked up in a pub or by the roadside—to escape back to Eden. You are the Chosen, the Elect. I have chosen you, I have elected you, with God at my elbow. Count yourselves fortunate above all others, O my people.

"Aboard this ship we have all that is necessary to create a new world. I have ransacked civilization to give us what we need to establish a better life outside civilization. We shall not starve nor want. I and your Heavenly Father have seen to that. All we need is our palmy island and our surf-fringed tropic shore, our golden days and our star-hung nights, and then, by the sweat of our brows—for your brows are going to sweat, my children—we shall build a new Jerusalem. I promise you that, I, Erasmus Quail."

He lifted his great arm on high, and the red of the sunset haloed him in glory.

"Quack! Quack!" said my little brother, Jonathan.

It was just a family joke of ours, making no sense at the best of times. Quail—quack, quack. Piped now, in that moment, in shrill and piercing tones by Jonathan it was devastating. A gasp went round. I didn't know where to look or what to do; I waited for thunder and lightning to strike my little brother.

"Jonathan!" I said, beneath my breath, in horror and reproach.

My Uncle Erasmus dropped his arm. I couldn't imagine what he was going to do. Nor could anyone else. That quack-quack! hung in the air like a gull's cry.

Uncle Erasmus paused just a second, and then he flung back his great head and gave a bellow of laughter. We all laughed, too, relieved—and I loudest of all.

"Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings," said my uncle, "not perfect praise but sound wisdom. Quack! Quack! I talk too much. Much too much. You knew all this or you wouldn't be here. But it is a great temptation for a prophet and leader to blather out words. Enough, enough."

Suddenly his gaze concentrated on one point, and to my horror I realized I was the point.

"You, boy," he said. "Who are you?"

It wasn't that I wanted to tell tales on Jonathan, but I simply didn't know what to answer.

"I didn't say it," I said. "Not quack, quack."

"Quack, quack, bah!" said my uncle. "Quack, quack, bootlaces. I asked your name."

"Jeremy Michael Antony Quail, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said.

"As if you didn't know," laughed Aunt Grace. "Your own brother's son."

"Of course, of course," said my uncle, as if remembering. "Come up here, boy. Look lively."

The command startled me into life. Still thinking of that quack-quack my knees knocked together, but I made them carry me up the ladder to the poop, and there I was away down far below Uncle Erasmus's golden belt almost before I seemed to have stirred.

"Boy," he said, "why do you wear those glasses?"

"Mother got them for me at the optician's," I said,

"You like them, boy?"

"I hate them. They hurt my nose, and they hurt my eyes. They make my headaches worse."

"These things are toys of the devil," said my uncle, sternly. He stooped down from up in the air, and took them from my nose. Then he hurled them high into the blue and over the side. They glittered briefly as they went. He laid his hand on my head, and it was heavy and firm and quiet and still, like a hand of rock. "By the power invested in me by the good God," said my uncle, "I heal your eyes and rid them of those damn silly window-panes. You see well now, boy?"

I blinked and looked about me. Don't ask me why, but everything was clear and bright and there was no pain in my head, as there had been, on and off, for a long time.

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said. "And thank you."

"Nothing, boy, nothing," he said. "You seem a likely boy, and my dead brother's son, eh? Good! Good! You shall be my powder-monkey. I attach you to my personal service. Get below now, boy, faster than your legs can carry you. In my cabin on the table you will find a glass and a bottle of rum. Fill the glass half full of the rum, and bring it to me. Bring also my banjo. Run, boy, run."

Be sure I ran. Down in the dark little brown box of a cabin which my uncle had had built for himself in the stern I found the bottle and did as he had told me. The rum smelt like golden syrup which had gone very sour. The banjo was there, too. My mother had told me about that. All his days my uncle had longed to play a musical instrument, but his life had never given him the chance. When the gold came to him he bought the banjo and had himself taught to play it—not very well for all the sovereigns he spent, my mother added, but well enough so that the music sounded heavenly in his ears, because he made it himself.

I was as quick and as careful as I could be, being very proud to have been chosen as powder-monkey.

My uncle had been giving some instructions about the voyage, but he ended just as I returned.

"Thank you, boy," said he, "and I'm glad to see the measure is correct—not stinted. You have the makings, boy, the makings." He drank a long swig from the glass and set it down on the rail. "There are some," he said, "who would

feel like having a hymn at a moment like this, but I have other ideas. Of hymns we shall have plenty anon. Just now I give you this."

The sun was setting down behind the smudge of Australia. The purple and gold of the sunset was brighter than ever now, and yet in some queer fashion it had turned sad. It started a pain like vague toothache in you to look at the beautiful, sorrowful sky. The breeze had freshened a little, and yet instead of seeming more boisterous it sighed over the *Quail*. The sea faded from deepest blue to silver, losing its warmth, chilling. Up over the rim of the world where the bows pointed the night had begun to flow as a faint purple mist.

Uncle Erasmus sat sideways on the rail, by his glass of rum, and, nursing his beloved banjo on his lap, began to sing, in a deep bass voice which went down and down into your heart and the bottom of your shoes. He sang "Home, Sweet Home."

And everything we were leaving behind, everything which hadn't seemed to matter, everything we were glad to be quit of, came running out across the ocean after us, came snatching at us, pulling at us, tugging at us, dragging us back.

At that time, of course, I didn't put the feeling into those words. I only knew I was unutterably sorry that we were sailing away in this ship, and leaving all we knew. The little house, my school, my playmates, the streets, the lights, the moving picture show, the picnics—all this became much more real than the *Quail*, and much more wonderful. Silly that it should be so, but so it was.

My Uncle Erasmus went on, line after line, verse after verse, tolling the great bell of his voice, twanging the banjo which he dwarfed into a toy.

I had been seeing perfectly without my glasses, but now everything was a mist. I couldn't see them, but I knew all the others were sad like me, and sorry to be there, out on the great lonely ocean in a little sailing-ship, heading we knew not whither and into the unknown, just because my Uncle Erasmus had told us to.

When he finished at last, with a final ringing twang on the strings, the quick dark was closing down, and all the colours had been washed away by the thin purple mist. There was a

little pause, through which a sigh ran and a sound of sobs. I knew my mother was crying again, but I could not move, for I was Uncle Erasmus' powder-monkey and attached to him for duty.

It was my Aunt Grace who broke the silence. She had never been afraid of any man, not even Uncle Erasmus. She stepped forward right below him and stood looking up, her black eyes blazing.

"You fool, Erasmus," she said. "You sweep us away on your barmy expedition to the Promised Land, and then you break our hearts. 'Home, Sweet Home' at this moment! I never heard worse! Better anything than that. If this is your idea of fun, then I'd like to put you across my knee and spank it out of you."

My uncle struck a few cheerful jangles on the strings.

"Well spoken, Grace," he said, "but for all your looks you're an awful simpleton. Otherwise you wouldn't be here. Can you imagine marrying any man aboard? And you such a marrying girl. No matter. There is method in my madness, Grace. There always is, you'll find. So you are homesick, eh?—blubbing all of you for that black world from which I've saved you. Fools. Your home, sweet home lies ahead, not astern. That is what you must learn. Be homesick to-night, and to-morrow, if you are still homesick for the past, my golden wand will give you a last chance. Think well to-night; talk as you will. There is still that chance. And now, below and get your supper and eat it. I am weary of you. Below, I say."

He waved them away, arms flung out, the banjo like a sceptre—or a clown's bladder.

"Boy," he said, turning suddenly on me, "another rum. And look alive."

I came back to a deck deserted save for a couple of sailors lighting lanterns, and the man at the wheel. The first pale stars were out.

"You have the makings of a good powder-monkey, boy," said my uncle, taking the glass. "A tip from an old stager. Never touch rum, my boy. Never touch it. In the new world there will only be spring water, the purest gift of God. Do you like spring water, boy?"

"I like ginger-beer, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, truthfully.

"Bah," snorted Uncle Erasmus. "Ginger-beer! Another brand to be snatched from the burning. We'll see to it. Very good health, boy. Very good health."

He loomed above me shutting out whole universes of stars. I felt very small and lost and puzzled and rather afraid, but I loved him.

II

The other children had been put to bed in the ladies' cabin, but the fact that I was Uncle Erasmus's powder-monkey gave me a special status and made me almost a grown-up. It was queer and yet nice in the saloon—so different from any room on shore, perhaps because it was alive and moved along instead of just staying put. The supper things had been cleared from the two long tables. The rows of bunks along the sides—the gentlemen's bunks—made it look rather like the drawing of the catacombs in dad's book about Rome.

The song Uncle Erasmus had sung was still in everyone's mind, and they were talking more about the past than the future, and trying to puzzle out what he meant by the final chance to go back. I could have told them they were wasting their breath. No ordinary person could puzzle out what my Uncle Erasmus meant until he chose to tell them himself.

My mother was sewing, her needle sparkling in the light from the hanging lamp. Looking up she smiled at me, as if amused and somehow touched to see me sitting there like a real man, but I was afraid that now she was aware of me she might forget I was the powder-monkey, so when she bent over her work again I slipped away, and went quietly up the brass-tipped stairs.

It was a wonderful thing to step out of the brown box that covered the top of the ladder straight into the night. The change was as sudden and complete as it is when you dive from a spring-board and the water closes over you and you are in a new world altogether. The air was so black and thick and warm that it rubbed against the skin like a piece of plush. Never, even out in the bush, had there been so many stars. There were hosts of them, millions of them—stars everywhere, not only in the sky but in the sea. The sea was full of drowned

stars. And little paths of golden starlight crinkled across the smooth water. Yet you could hardly imagine that the ocean was really there. It seemed more as if the *Quail* had turned into the magic carpet and was sailing along in space.

The size of the night made the schooner—such a huge craft she had been, tied up in harbour—into a cockleshell. Now it was hard to realize that she was big enough to hold me—and I felt smaller than before I went to school—let alone all the people who were aboard her.

Astern, the man at the wheel did not appear to be on the *Quail* at all. The light from the binnacle lit up his face and arms and chest. He wore a blue sweater, though it was quite hot, and there was no expression in his golden face, as he stared ahead. Tattooed blue dragons crawled out from under his sleeves across the back of the hands that grasped the spokes. He looked like a painted picture of a man hung up against the stars.

You weren't allowed to speak to the man at the wheel.

I went forward, and it was surprising to find the solid deck stretching along in the darkness when the ship herself seemed to have become so tiny. For all the little noises, the slap-slap of water, the creaking of ropes, the dry rustle of canvas, the night was very quiet, asleep.

But people were still awake. The smell of tobacco came clearly through the clean air, and cigarettes and pipes burned little red holes in the blackness. They had a homely and friendly look. I went along to them, seeing better now that my eyes were accustomed to the starlight. A group of men were yarning on the main hatch, and the glimmer of the canvas cover made it look as if they were sprawled on a white raft.

"Hullo, son," said one of them. "What are you doing about at this hour?"

A match was struck, just an ordinary match, but it flared up like a torch, lighting us all briefly in scarlet.

"It's young *Quail*. Since the Boss has appointed him his off-sider I suppose he reckons he has privileges."

"Shouldn't be prowling about on your own. What if you fell overboard? Sit down, son."

"Only, faith! If you hear any bad language don't listen."

"That was a silly thing Erasmus did, throwing the kid's glasses away."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that now," said the Irishman called Mr. Murphy. "I was talking to Mrs. Quail herself awhile back. She rests easy about it. Thinks it may be a good thing and all. Seems she took the laddie to a snide optician's and has often wondered whether the glasses were right, or whether, in truth, he needed them at all, but they'd cost a lot of money she didn't have, so there it was. And wasn't I able to confirm what was in her mind? Didn't me own kid brother get fitted with specs by just such another, and, ten years later, didn't a proper eye-doctor tell the pore fellow he should never have had to wear glasses at all, but now the harm was done. How do you feel about it, me boy-o?"

"I feel happy about it, Mr. Murphy," I said. "At school they used to call me Four-Eyes. I only wish Uncle Erasmus had laid his hand on my head and worked his miracle ages ago."

"Mother of God," said Mr. Murphy, "what blasphemy is this? A miracle you call it? You'd have us be thinking that your uncle can work miracles?"

"I know he can, Mr. Murphy," I said, for that was the truth and he wasn't going to frighten me out of it.

"Perhaps the child's right." I recognized the voice. It belonged to Mr. Paterson, who coughed a lot and looked like the pictures of Robert Louis Stevenson. He had the same half-starved, eager yet sad look. His voice was gentle and kind.

"Yes," he said, "miracles. I agree with Jeremy. In the world as I found it if you had enough money anything was possible. Even miracles. Erasmus Quail worked a miracle for me. As I was saying when this young man interrupted, there was I sitting on a park-bench in the Domain watching my toes through my burst-out shoes. I was sick and hungry and suicidal. When Quail sat down beside me he did me good before we spoke a word. He wasn't dressed properly as he is now, but in absurd town clothes. You only noticed them to be aware of how wrong they were for him. It was the man himself. He was the antithesis of everything I was—bold and strong and masterful and reckless. It did my

heart good to look at him, sitting there like a statue by Rodin.

"He looked me over with those amazing blue eyes of his, and when he said: 'What's the hard luck story, friend?' I almost felt there was no need to tell it to him as he knew it already. Anyway, I did. An unemployable, consumptive schoolteacher destitute in the Domain looking at the harbour which he'd never throw himself into—the obvious solution—because of the morbid desire for life that possesses a man when he knows that the means of drawing the breath of life is rotting away in his breast. I didn't make any bones about it, and I was sure he'd give me some money, which, believe me, I was ready to take. No false pride just then about Francis Paterson. 'God seeth the sparrow fall,' said Quail in his deep gong of a voice. My heart dropped down. In my experience when people refer your case to God you're out of luck for something to buy a meal or a bed.

"But all I could afford to do was to nod some sort of agreement. I didn't know I was talking to Erasmus Quail of the Daybreak strike; I didn't know that miracles still happen. He worked this miracle so easily. He put his hand on my knee and said: 'Come with me, skin-and-bones. I embark on an enterprise you can share.' It was as simple as that. I went with him, and be sure without questioning. And here I am. And so, you see, gentlemen, you should not mock young Jeremy's faith. I believe with him that his uncle works miracles. I believe his eyes are well again just as firmly as he does."

"Thank you, sir," I said politely, for I was grateful to Mr. Paterson.

A sort of murmur of agreement went up from the others as they puffed away, and you could feel each one of them thinking that there were other miracles my Uncle Erasmus had worked.

"I wonder what he has up his sleeve for to-morrow?" someone asked.

"I don't know at all at all," said Mr. Murphy. "It's a queer business. Who'd want to be turning back?"

"Not me," said Mr. Paterson. "I want my tropic island and my palm trees and my sun."

"And who wouldn't?" Mr. Murphy said. "Me, I'd go with

Erasmus to hell and back. 'Tis the Irish in me. Lotus-eaters, didn't he say? Glory be to God, I hope he didn't mean it—eating flowers—but if I get his drift, that suits me. That's what I hoped for all along. As for all that about no return ticket after to-morrow, 'tis nothing but a blither of nonsense. Faith, I've heard enough about the Islands to know that there'll be trading schooners calling no matter how far at the back of beyond we are, and anyone who wants to buzz back to the fleshpots—why, all he has to do is to hop aboard one and there he is. We'll have to keep contact with the outside world. This *Quail* now. She'll be plying to and fro, bringing us our needs. Even his High-and-Mightiness can't dump us clear outside the world."

"If he wants to, I think he will," said Mr. Paterson.

"I know he will," I said.

But they wouldn't believe us. They argued the thing couldn't be done, not even by Uncle Erasmus. The only way, they said, in which he could get us right outside the world was by taking us to the Moon or Venus or somewhere.

It was nice there on the hatch, a man among men, but my mother appeared in the little bright box of the companionway. She looked far off, like a statue in a niche at the other end of a dark church.

"Jeremy, darling," she called. "Where are you, darling?"

I could hear she thought I was dead and drowned in the sea and floating about in the darkness among the stars. I forgot everything about being a powder-monkey and ran to her as fast as I could go and she bent down very quickly and hugged me in her arms. She smelt of violets, as she always did.

III

"Boy," boomed Uncle Erasmus. "Where's that powder-monkey? Boy! Boy!"

Be sure I was quick to scurry up to the poop. Down on the main deck everyone was happy. They couldn't have been otherwise. The sea was so very blue, the morning air so fresh and everything so like a picnic. And there was the excitement about the huge smudge of smoke feathering up against the

blue and the ship taking shape beneath it. It was accepted as a matter of course that she was connected with Uncle Erasmus.

Captain Butterwick stood beside my uncle. Though he only came up to my uncle's elbow he was the fattest man I had ever seen. His little short legs carried a vast globe of a body, and he had a terrace of chins. His cheeks puffed up so that his eyes looked out as if they were peeping through keyholes. And yet, for all his bulk he moved lightly and quickly, wafting along on tiny feet, like a balloon blowing about the deck.

"Heave to, skipper," said my uncle. "She'll be up with us in no time, and then we'll see. You, boy, bring me my pipe and tobacco."

I fled below and found the things on the table in his cabin. The pipe was a huge meerschaum, the bowl the colour of wild bees' honey. It smelt. His pouch was a kind of sack made from iguana skin, and he carried his matches in a tobacco tin the lid of which had been cleaned of all its printing and polished silver by long use. When I got back the *Quail* had come round into the wind, and was sitting on the water, swaying slightly, sails flat and flapping. A rooster crowed from forward, and people were lining the rail, and gazing out over the water.

"Thank you, boy," said my uncle, pushing tobacco into his pipe with a big, horny thumb.

The steamer beneath the pillar of smoke had become a big tug. Her blunt bows pushed the water aside in a white wave as she came puffing fussily through the morning, like a black bulldog pup swimming after us.

"Well, boy," said my uncle, "and how much do you think this little whim has cost me? How much to have a tug chase you out from Sydney and meet you in mid-ocean?"

"I don't know, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, watching the tug, which, though so black and business-like, sparkled when the sunlight lit up brass as if she had been scattered with his sovereigns. "An awful, awful lot of money."

"Wrong, boy, wrong," he said. "That's one of the oddities of life, boy. Things only cost money when you haven't enough of it. The really rich never have to pay for anything. Why is that, boy?"

"Because, sir, Uncle Erasmus, I suppose they don't miss what they do pay."

"Correct, boy, correct," said my Uncle, patting my head approvingly. "You have the makings." He moved to the rail. "Aft," he shouted. "Everybody aft."

They came eagerly, their upturned faces a cluster of question marks.

"Friends," said my uncle in the quiet broken only by the farm noises and the sails' rattlings, "I am not going to sing you 'Home, Sweet Home' again. Instead I offer it to you on a golden platter. I hope you have talked things over; I hope you have made up your minds—for it is now or never.

"Yonder comes the tug *Powerful* chartered by me with gracious foresight. She is the last chance of which I spoke. Look into your hearts. Are you worthy to be of my Elect? Is there any man among you who hankers for horse-racing and boozers and prize-fights? Is there any woman among you who will not be happy without matinées and fashions and tea-parties in the suburbs? Is there any parent who wishes to take a child back to that hell of a world we have left behind? Should there be any such among you—speak now." He pointed his yellow pipe at them like a gun. "A hundred sovereigns and a free passage with no ill-feeling awaits each of those who wish to return to yesterday and the hideous to-morrows and to-morrows that are coming as surely as that tug-boat there. You have, perhaps, fifteen minutes. I leave you to your thoughts, and the Lord Jehovah guide you aright."

He turned on his heel and marched back into the curve of the stern where he had had a big leather chair placed for him. The chair was quite wrong on deck in the bright sun—it should have been in a parlour—but somehow when he sat in it he made it look a kind of natural throne. I didn't need to worry about what my mother was deciding. Her mind was made up. I followed him, being attached to him in duty.

He lit his pipe, lounged back and blew a great cloud through the gold of his beard. It went on trickling out like smoke through dry bracken.

"Stand here before me, boy," he said. "Tell me, boy, do you think I'm mad?"

I was shocked by his question, horrified.

"Mad, sir, Uncle Erasmus?" I stammered. "How could you be?"

He chuckled down in his stomach at me.

"Quite right, boy," he said. "Honour your uncle, boy—he is a great man. You must think no evil of him. Only I may question my own sanity. That is my prerogative. What is a prerogative, boy?"

"It means, I think, sir, Uncle Erasmus, your right."

"Correct, boy, correct. I do not waste my breath on you. You are a smart boy for your years. And if I should be mad, mark this: I am only mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw. Who said that, boy?"

"I don't know, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I had to admit feeling I failed him.

"Hamlet, boy. Have you not read Shakespeare, the immortal bard?"

I shook my head in renewed regret.

"Excellent, excellent," said my uncle, warmly. "Shakespeare should not be thrust down the necks of babes to sicken them of him for life. Shakespeare is food for men, not pap for infants. But you are bright, boy. You are a reader?"

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus, I have read a lot."

"What have you read?"

"Ballantyne, sir, Henty and some of Stevenson and Kipling and Dumas and a lot of travel books about hunting the animals of Africa and about the South Sea Islands."

"The answer pleases, boy," he said, wagging his head. "The South Seas, eh? So you know something of the still vex'd Bermoothes?"

"I don't know any group called the Bermoothes, sir, Uncle Erasmus."

"Well spoken, boy, for they are in another ocean." He considered a moment, stroking his beard, forgetting me. "And yet I wonder are they? Are they not any island such as we seek?" He came back to me. "And Africa, eh? You know Africa?"

"From books, sir, Uncle Erasmus. I have read Sir H. H. Johnston, sir." I was proud of that, for Sir H. H. Johnston's books were fat and heavy and very grown-up. No other boys

I knew had ever read him. But the name did not mean a thing to my uncle.

"Africa," said my uncle. "I fought there against the Boers. There will be wars that will make my war seem the smallest of skirmishes, but it was there I learnt the smell of death; it was there, by the grace of the Lord, I acquired the sixth sense which enables a man to scent death. I tell you, boy, the air of the world back there is heavy with the reek of death, and it will not clear for half a century. That is a long slice in the life of a man who cometh up like a flower and is cut down again. To buy escape from that is as good a use as any to which to put my gold. So perhaps I am not even mad north-north-west. Perhaps I am the sanest man alive."

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I agreed from the bottom of my heart.

He sent a long plume of smoke at me, considering me with his big blue eyes that looked right through me.

"Do you know why I have chosen you as my powder-monkey and confidant, boy?" he said.

"Because you want somebody nippy on their feet to get things for you?"

"Because you are young, boy. Grown-ups do not listen—they only hear themselves. They do not remember. Your mind is like the virgin wax of a gramophone record on which Mr. Edison captures words and music. I shall write on the wax of your mind, boy, and it will remain there longer than if I wrote in ink on paper. Ink fades, boy, paper perishes, but what is written on a mind like yours at your age—that endures. One day you shall write my bible—you shall be the chronicler of this exodus I lead into the Promised Land. You are chosen by the Lord Jehovah; but do not let that worry you, boy. See how little it worries me to be His instrument. When the time comes you will know and remember." He stretched his arms and stood up. "And now," he said, "to see what goats I have herded in with my sheep."

A hoarse blare shattered the blue globe of peace which had formed about the *Quail*, and there, quite close, broad and sturdy, and yet puffing and fussing as if after the chase, was the tug-boat. Although only yesterday she would have been

commonplace she was more startling now than a sea-serpent would have been. Down on the main deck every one was staring at her as if they had never seen anything so queer before. The feather of steam died away, and her smoke drifted in a black veil towards us.

Men over there were staring across and on the canvas-sided bridge the captain leaned, wearing a cap with tarnished braid. One of our jokes at home had been how like their dogs dogs' masters were. He was a bulldog of a man in charge of his bullpup tug.

My uncle gave him a wave of recognition and acceptance—a lordly kind of wave which acknowledged him and the *Powerful* as something paid for. The captain made a kind of half salute and waited, resting on his folded arms.

"My people," tolled Uncle Erasmus, calling them back to him immediately, "you know the terms of the offer. The cities lie there, the *Powerful* is their symbol. Smoke, engines, coal, wheels and pistons, jobs, bosses, wages, slavery. When God's winds fail us she will thrust back to all you have ever known. We sail with our bits of canvas into the blue and the Mystery, but she will be back in Sydney-town to-night. For the last time, who goes with her? Choose."

He had spoken gravely, and quietly for him. After he had stopped his words still seemed to hang over the schooner. Never had she been more lovely, more like a seabird, more natural to this ocean scene. The tug was squat and ugly and sordid, a grimy intruder. No one could possibly wish to exchange her for the *Quail*.

"Well?" my uncle challenged, confidently. The people down below, my mother and Aunt Grace, the children and the grown-ups, all stood wagging their heads in refusal, like a lot of poppy stalks blown by a little breeze. "No?" he said.

"No," they agreed in one sound, each speaking quietly and yet in chorus, making a muffled shout.

"You have spoken," said Uncle Erasmus. He walked to the schooner's side.

"Thank you for your pains," he called across. "There are no passengers for Yesterday."

"No one at all?" said the bulldog, cupping his hand to his ear, as if he couldn't believe what he had heard.

"No one."

"One thing they told me to ask you, Mr. Quail," the captain bawled across, "is there a young person aboard b' the name of Namy Drew—a bit of a girl with no clothes?"

"There is not," said Uncle Erasmus. "She is not of the Elect. Why do you ask?"

"Only that she's run away and she's got no clothes and she wrote her mother she was going with you. Her mother said if she had it was good riddance to bad rubbish. But she's not aboard, eh?"

"I have answered you, captain," said Uncle Erasmus.

"I know, I know," said the captain apologetically. "It was only they told me to ask." He gave a waggle with his hands as if he threw the question overboard. "Well," he said, "wished all jobs come our way was as easy. So I'll be getting back now. Thanks a lot, Mr. Quail. S'long, and all you'd wish yourself."

My uncle made a lordly gesture of dismissal and tugged his beard.

"My thanks," he said. "Think of us when the Navy commandeers you for the wars."

"What?" called the captain, cupping his ear again, but my uncle merely repeated his gesture.

The people lounging about the tug raised their hands and jerked them in the air stiffly. They were laughing together and spitting over the side. We waved back. The captain stepped stockily across and wrenched a cord. Three puffs of steam shot up from the stocky funnel, and the *Powerful* turned away in a wide sweep, showed us her broad stern and went off, tossing up the water in white and sparkling hills behind her. The *Quail* and she had done with each other. The contact and interest there had been snapped in the instant, and nobody even bothered to watch her dwindle back into a speck.

My Uncle Erasmus turned to Captain Butterwick and said: "Now, sir, I consider we are fully embarked. So far the weather is kind. Had it been otherwise the response just now would have been very different. Were you ever seasick, sir?"

"Never, Mr. Quail," said Captain Butterwick in his little voice which came out of his round body like a squeak from a toy balloon.

"I was, sir," said my uncle. "All the way from Australia

to Africa and back again, and in a troopship, which is no place for such indulgence. Nothing the Boers did to me in between amounted to a song by comparison. I vowed never to set foot aboard ship again, yet at the Lord's bidding I am here. Let us remember He troubles the waters. Your men are few. I desire you now to pick watches from the others so that we may be prepared. Turn them to, sir—make them work and learn their jobs. It is well they should realize that even in the Promised Land men must work, and, I suppose, alackaday, as Alfred, Lord Tennyson has said, women must weep."

"You're right, Mr. Quail," said the captain, and wafted off lightly on his tiny feet.

"Boy," said Uncle Erasmus, "did Alfred, Lord Tennyson, write the lines I just quoted?"

"No, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said. "The man who wrote *Water Babies* did."

"Admirable," said my uncle, "and knowing, you didn't presume to correct me! Admirable! Boy, bring me a rum, as usual."

I fled, and returned with the same measure.

My uncle considered the glass.

"You show the makings, boy," he said. "A fool would have brought me just that little more in the hope of pleasing me. Note well, boy, that that was noted. Make no attempt to be smarter than your fool uncle. For there is nobody smarter than a fool, boy, as you shall learn when I bring you to Shakespeare." He took a swig and smacked his lips behind his beard. "Never touch it, boy," he warned. "This is devil's milk, and it is only under the indulgence of the Lord that I am able to take the stuff. But to continue: If a while back you had dared to say I was mad, I could have convinced you otherwise—had I not thrown you to the sharks—by explaining to you, how, given the Guidance, this seemingly crazy Exodus has been devised. Come, boy, look."

Glass in hand he stepped to the rail. Below the women were drifting in groups to do their duties in the cabins, and the men were standing about while Captain Butterwick floated among them telling them of the working of the ship in which they would have to share from now on. Uncle Erasmus, jerking his beard at this one and that, explained.

Patrick Murphy, the big Irishman who had been talking on the hatch the night before, was a drunkard and a waster, but there would be nothing for him to drink and nothing to waste in the Promised Land. On the other hand he was the best blacksmith and worker in metal one could wish to meet when he was sober, and, though he didn't know it yet, down in the hold were all the tools of his trade, a complete blacksmith's shop, and this would be his share in the future. Seed wheat, potatoes and all other things with ploughs and harrows and such were down in the hold, and on the deck were three farmers who would know how to use all those things and teach others. Petersen, the big Swede, was a dull giant with the mind of a six-year-old, but give him tools and the wood and there wasn't anything he couldn't do, or teach others to do. The carpenter's tools were in the hold. There was a baker and a butcher and a tailor and a shoemaker among all those people I hadn't had time to sort out yet, being dazzled and busy about being my uncle's powder-monkey. There was even a doctor who knew dentistry, too.

"I was guided to him in the Sydney Central Police Court," said Uncle Erasmus.

"In a police court, sir, Uncle Erasmus?" I gasped, for people in police courts were bad people who beat their wives and stole things and got drunk, and it seemed strange that my uncle should have any dealings with them. "Whatever had he done?"

"Nothing that's our concern any more, boy. Or his. He is a brilliant man, and the Lord Jehovah brought us together in his hour of need. Where we are going there will be no money and no temptation. He will be true there to his Hippocratic oath. He carried it, poor man, on a piece of tattered vellum in his inner pocket. A touching document, boy, in the circumstances. But he is saved, and he shall save. Ah ha, I found quite a jewel in Dr. Barnaby, who had a slum practice and was tempted by the rich. Now I have bought him his chance, and he will take it, boy, and raise his head again and be glad, for he is a good man, boy. You have yet to learn how many good men are bad, and t'other way round. If all works out, you may never have to learn it. This rum is heartening and the sun shines, and all prospers." He drained his glass and handed it to me. "There

are other points, boy, which are not clear to you yet. How well the sexes are worked out—no, not worked out—how well they have panned out, as we fossickers say. There are enough married people and enough single, enough children. It was important, above all else, that I should help those who needed help, but God works in a mysterious way his wonders to perform, and he has chosen to work through me which is, indeed, a great mystery, come to think of it. So here I have, boy, an embryo world aboard the *Quail*, without any wisdom or cunning on my part, but only the God-given gold to buy the trimmings, the essential inessentials on which the wheels of life run. Some of my Elect are sick of body and mind—some are bad, some weak—but with all that they are humans, boy, such as settled America, such as settled Australia, and the more human for their frailties and failures. Nobody would ever have gone, boy, to America or Australia if they had been successes at home. Yet they tamed continents and built nations out of their poor material. They essayed too much—great canvases which had to be full of flaws because their creators were too small. I plan, boy, a miniature, a cameo, working on a tiny scale which must be perfect, a scale within the scope of man. It cannot afford poverty or wealth or war, but it cannot afford to be dull, either. It is a high ambition, but under the Lord Jehovah I shall achieve it. Boy, bring me my banjo, that I may sing before the Lord.”

I brought it to him, and left him in his leather chair in the sunshine, strumming, and singing in a deep undertone “Lily of Laguna,” and as I went I remembered that Mr. Paterson was a schoolteacher and it seemed to me that Uncle Erasmus was a great man who had forgotten nothing though he just seemed to be striding along and drinking rum.

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CHAPTER II

I

WE were playing hopscotch on a corner of the deck we'd chalked out when the excitement forward put the game out of our heads. Up there the men were busy taking off a hatch-cover, heads and hands and chins wagging. We ran, the lot of us.

"Whatever's up, Mr. Murphy?" I asked the big Irishman, for whom the anvil waited though he didn't know it.

"Faith, 'tis not what's up, m'dear, but what's down. There's a living soul below here, a-knockin' and a-knockin'. Ah, the pore creature—all those black hours down in the black hold. Enough to drive a man mad entirely."

But, when they got the hatches off and pushed down their hands, it wasn't a man they hauled out, after all, but a little scraggly girl. She was the queerest little girl I ever saw, with a peaked and freckled face and a nose that turned up, and huge grey eyes, made dazzled and bigger than ever by the sunlight after the dark. Her hair stuck out at the back in two pigtails tied with bits of string, and she had on no shoes or stockings or anything at all except a sack on which was printed in black letters across her front: COLONIAL SUGAR REFINERY No. 1 GRADE WHITE.

She came as such a surprise that everyone, grown-ups and all, could only goggle at her. She was a bit knocked over by so many people and the sun and the sky and the ship and everything, but she wasn't afraid. Her brows drew together, and her chin stuck out, and her bony little hands clenched. She didn't sit down or fall over or anything like that as you would expect, but just stood braced with her bare feet apart, kind of daring the lot of us.

The men began to chuckle and swear and say: "Well, can you beat that!" and "Only a kid!" and "Where did you spring from?" But none of them touched her, once they'd put her down on her feet, any more than they would have touched a tiger cub.

I remembered the tug-boat.

"You're Namy," I said, "that ran away." I didn't go on about her mother's message.

"I am Naomi," she said, correcting me as if we were at school. "I am a stowaway."

That made the men laugh more than ever. They slapped their legs and said she was a packet and a turn-up. All the kids were staring at her, round-eyed and dumb, because she looked so odd there suddenly just dressed in a sack with ragged holes torn at the bottom for her legs and the top tied up about her neck.

"The impertinence of the bit of a thing," said Mr. Murphy. "Acting as if she was the very Queen. What will himself have to say to this now?"

That reminded me of my uncle.

"I'll take her along to him," I said.

"Indeed, that might be the best way," said Mr. Paterson, coughing. "You'll explain everything no doubt, Jeremy?"

"Oh, yes, sir," I said.

They talked about it for a moment or so, and then agreed, so Naomi and I went along the deck together, leaving them staring after us.

"You mustn't be frightened of my uncle," I said. "He looks very savage and big but he is a great man and good is my uncle. Don't you be frightened."

"Frightened," said Naomi. "Me frightened?" A small laugh popped out of her at the mere idea, as if she had been living with crocodiles and snakes all her life and nothing could ever scare her again.

"You haven't seen him yet all the same, not my uncle," I said, for I wasn't going to have him laughed off by a girl in a sack, just as if he were nothing.

"Pooh," she said.

We went up to the poop, but there was nobody there except the man at the wheel who blinked at us. Then we went down the ladder to the brown door of my uncle's cabin. Though I didn't want her to be too frightened I rather hoped he'd be doing something big and grand, but when he shouted for me to come in I found he was sitting on his bunk darning a sock. After all the years when he'd had to fend for himself he still liked to do such jobs, though my mother or even Aunt

Grace would have been glad to do his darning for him, and much better.

I was a bit excited, so that all I could find to say was: "Sir, Uncle Erasmus, her name isn't Namy but Naomi."

"What are you talking about, boy?" he asked, darning away. He looked huge and awe-inspiring in the little cabin, but he shouldn't have been darning.

I didn't have the chance to explain, because Naomi brushed past me and stepped in.

"Me," she said.

My uncle didn't show any surprise. He went on darning, looking at her with his big blue eyes, his beak of a nose thrust out at her.

"Naomi?" he said. "That is a good Bible name."

"She's the little girl the tug-boat captain asked about, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said hastily. "The one he wanted to know if we had aboard. The one whose mother said if we had it was a case of——" But I couldn't go on, because it was an awful thing for a mother to say about a girl who had run away.

"On this occasion," said my uncle, "what the mother said is not evidence. A literary reference, my boy, but let it pass."

Naomi stood there, legs straddled again, ready even to fight my uncle. Her big eyes were fixed on his face as if he were something she was learning to read instead of all he was.

"You didn't like your mother, girl?"

"I hated her," said Naomi, not crossly, just telling him.

"Your father?"

"I never had one, Mr. Uncle."

"So you ran away?"

"I did."

"In those clothes, eh?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Uncle. I had on the clothes she'd bought me. I didn't want any of them—not even my hair ribbons. So I stole this sack and bits of string. It's not a very good sack. I think they'd thrown it away. And the string, too. It was near a big warehouse. I had a shilling of my own which I'd saved until I could run away somewhere far. I got it long ago when I held a man's horse. I'd hidden it, you see, and she never knew. I bought some chocolate biscuits with sixpence, and then I made myself my sack and I wrapped

the clothes up in some brown paper I found in a rubbish bin, and tied the parcel with some of the string and sent everything of hers I had back to my mother."

My uncle wasn't cross. He was smiling in his beard.

"I can see you didn't like her," he said. "I shall take your word for her. But how did you dodge the policemen, wandering about Sydney in—er—your sack?"

"But I wasn't wandering about Sydney then. I was down just near your boat. A boy who was there lent me a pencil and I wrote a letter to my mother telling her I was going right away. I gave the boy the parcel, and my other sixpence. He wanted to come with me, because he'd been looking at your boat, too, but I told him he couldn't. So he took my sixpence and the parcel to post it with and went away. I suppose he stole the sixpence, and my mother will never know how I didn't even want her clothes. Yet he seemed a nice boy, though he had no shoes on and a cold in the head."

"You mustn't think ill of everyone, girl," said Uncle Erasmus. "Shoes or no shoes, cold in the head and all, he was a nice boy. He didn't steal your sixpence, for your mother must have had your parcel and letter."

I didn't see why my uncle should say he was a nice boy just because he didn't steal sixpence from a girl who had nothing to wear but a sugar sack.

"I'm glad, Mr. Uncle," Naomi said, and smiled widely as if she felt the other people were much nicer than her mother.

"And then?"

"I waited until it was dark," said Naomi, "and then I came on to your boat and hid down there where they found me just now. The lid was off, and I slipped in. In the morning they put the lid on without seeing me, and I knew my mother could never get me again."

"Which was true enough," said Uncle Erasmus, putting down his darning and filling his big pipe. "And what did you have to eat?"

"My chocolate biscuits."

"And drink?"

"I found a beer bottle on the dock and filled it with water from a tap."

"I see," said my uncle. "Every luxury." He was teasing her, but she didn't know that.

"Yes, Mr. Uncle," she said, "but there's something horrid I must tell you about your boat. There are rats in your boat, Mr. Uncle—great big huge rats. They tried to bite me in the dark—they tried to eat my chocolate biscuits—they——"

At one moment she was talking quite calmly and properly, not afraid of my uncle or anyone, and the next she was just a huddle on the floor, as if the sugar bag had been dropped there.

"Uncle Erasmus, sir," I cried, "she's dead."

"This little one will take a lot of killing," he said, dropping his pipe and stooping quickly to pick her up. He wasn't like Uncle Erasmus at all but like a doctor or even a nurse. His great big hands were gentle and kind. He laid her on his own bunk. "God works in a mysterious way," he said. "I missed this small one of the Elect somehow, and yet here she is. He seeth the sparrow—blessed be His name."

He took the rum bottle, wet his finger and smeared the stuff on her lips.

Naomi looked like a little old rag doll lying on his big bunk, with her legs and arms limp and her eyes shut. I wasn't really cross with my uncle for liking her like that, because she wasn't a bit like any other little girl I'd ever met. She was more like a boy. The rats must have been awful.

"Go, boy, and bring your mother."

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said and ran, out of breath before I started.

II

In early afternoon the world suddenly turned purple. The clean sharp blue of sea and sky, which had been so lovely since we sailed, darkened and glowered. The golden sun, the picnic sun we had enjoyed, drew back and shrivelled and dulled like a raisin. The healthy air died and pressed its deadweight on the *Quail*. It was frightening.

No breeze now. Sails flapped and slapped as the schooner rolled, this way, that way, on the swollen sea where no waves showed. She seemed to have withered into a match-stick in the queer new light, and all her people were looking about, puzzled, startled, waiting, ants with twiddling antennæ.

"Boy," said Uncle Erasmus, his great beak of nose questing, "I am no sailor, but I am bushman. The Lord sends a great trial and testing upon us. Run, boy, like a scalded cat and wake the captain from his siesta."

Be sure I was away, for my skin was dry and prickling with fright. Down the brassbound stairs I clattered, calling: "Captain! Captain!" The door of his cabin next to my uncle's was closed, and he couldn't hear me. I didn't wait to knock politely but turned the knob and burst in.

The moment I did so I knew Captain Butterwick would never hear me or anyone ever again.

I had not seen death before, but I recognized it at the first goggling look. The captain sat in a bucket chair at a small desk. The chair just fitted his body, but all the buoyancy had gone from the balloon, the gas had solidified into putty. He sprawled back, his head hanging stiff and crooked, his hands open and very empty, his eyes, buried in the flesh, all whites. His mouth was set and open, frozen in a crooked O. He was so empty that he wasn't even frightening. The captain of the *Quail* just wasn't there.

I put a finger out and touched his cheek, more in curiosity than dread. It was cold and shiny and polished and grey-marble.

Of course, he wasn't a real friend of mine, or anything like that, but it was a shock to learn that this was what happened when you were dead—that you just went away and weren't there any more and left your shell behind like a butterfly coming out of the chrysalis. It hurt me. Death hitherto had been a thing that came to very old people—not people you'd known, except, of course, dad, but that was somehow different and happened when I was away on holiday in the bush, so that when I came home he just had gone and that, too, when I was little.

All at once, in that dead place I felt the schooner swinging to and fro so uneasily, and I remembered the purple world above and Uncle Erasmus waiting for me to bring the captain up to help him.

I couldn't bring the captain.

I turned away and raced back to my job as powder-monkey. Though it was still hours and hours from night the twilight purple had deepened in the little time I'd been away, and

now in the heaving water there were broad white veins, but still no wind at all, the schooner just lolling to and fro and the people on the deck below huddled in anxious clusters.

Uncle Erasmus was there, his nose and eyes and beard all seeking about.

"Sir, Uncle Erasmus," I panted, "he's dead. The captain's dead. No use counting on him."

I expected him, naturally, to say such news was nonsense, that I should have wakened him from his sleep, that captains didn't die, but he looked down at me from his height against the ugly sky, and said, quite calmly: "Dead, boy, eh? His heart I should say, or a stroke. A man much too fat, unhealthy, but I thought he would last out this job, which he needed badly enough with black marks against him. Oh, well, in a mysterious way——! Boy, go get me Mr. Umphelby who is supposed to be the bosun."

I found Mr. Umphelby amidships, standing with some of the men, a little gnome wagging his stubby wedge of silver beard about in glum foreboding.

"Mr. Umphelby," I said, "my uncle, Mr. Quail, wants you, and quick."

"Ah," said Mr. Umphelby sadly, "trouble? Whenever they call on me it means trouble. Excuse me, gents, please."

He came with me, such a slow old man that my feet ached being polite to him.

"Trouble," he kept repeating, "trouble," and "trouble" he was mumbling when he stood before my uncle.

"Of course there's trouble," said my uncle, "or I shouldn't have sent for you, old dotard."

"They always send for me," said the bosun, mumping up and down his jaws.

"I have erred," said Uncle Erasmus, "and yet who am I to say I have erred? The fact remains I put my trust in one man with, I should say, fatty degeneration of the heart, to take me and my people to the Promised Land. I didn't want a lot of sailors and trimmings. There is no real Promised Land for sailors—they must always join a new ship and go in quest of its will-o'-the-wisp. So there are only six men aboard who know anything of sea-work and you are now their nominal head. What do you think of this weather, mister?"

"Trouble, sir," said the bosun, chumping his jaws. "Trouble."

My uncle ran his fingers through his beard, looking as if he wished they were about the old man's scrawny neck, and yet, I knew, more angry with himself than anyone for not picking more carefully those who were to take us to the Promised Land which had seemed such a little, simple way.

"The Lord tells me," he said, speaking to himself more than us, "that a cyclone or a hurricane, or whatever the name may be, is upon us. Do you know what to do, dotard?"

The old man wagged his beard, and a blear of tears came into his eyes.

"No, sir," he said, "I was only engaged by Captain Butterwick at the last moment because the real bosun he'd booked let him down. My experience of seafaring, sir, is on the Sydney ferries."

My uncle did not get cross at this, but stroked his beard and thought apart from us for a moment. Then he said, as if remembering something from a book, "scudding under bare poles." He brushed the little mumping man away, and gave a great shout.

"Listen," he yelled, "every sail is to be lowered, and you'll all drown if they're not. Women and children below quick and stay there. Below! Get below and clear the decks if you value your lives." They ran like mice, the children who weren't powder-monkeys being herded along, swept along, in the mothers' skirts. The men had turned round to my uncle, alarmed and ready. "Now lower all the sails," he bawled, "and tie them up. You men who are supposed to be sailors take charge of the landlubbers, and work fast. There'll be hell and damnation loose any moment now, so the Lord cherish us—and spring to it."

They sprang to it, well-meaning because they knew their lives were in the scales, but awkward and untrained. They fell over each other, and did the wrong things and grabbed the wrong ropes and yelled and cursed, but still the sails came tumbling down in some fashion—avalanches which buried the landsmen and the few seafarers in snowdrifts of white canvas and wagging booms and snaking ropes. It was a muddle, it was pandemonium.

Out of the purple came a whistling scream and the sullen

sea foamed up into sudden frothy hills which were pushed down as they surged up. The great wind hit the *Quail* with a thrust and a blow which knocked her right over into the angry water, upsetting her, turning the deck into a crazy hill. Men were flung about like pebbles. The only sail they had not got down was on the mast nearest to us. The wind—what an absurd word to express such an onslaught!—thrust against this sail and the ropes that held it and the mast to which it was tied, and against the ship herself. The white wing and the brown taper of the mast for that split second became a lever which might turn the *Quail* right over and leave her upside down.

"Boy!" roared my uncle, swept me up in his arms and was swept away himself down the mad slope of the poop. His big body took the blow as we crashed against the bulwark, and from the cradle of his arms I saw the sail rip and tear in a delirious frenzy just as the tall mast came smashing down over the spot where we had been standing a breath before, down on the old mumping man who'd stood there paralysed, over the binnacle, over the wheel, and over the poor sailor who had clung to that wheel with no captain to give him orders. It came down slow yet sudden and unescapable, as a giant tree falls, and without any sound because the only sound in the world was the yell and roar of the storm. Along the sharp hill, as I lay in my uncle's arms, I saw little bits and pieces of wreckage cascading, and slow trickles of blood from the two crushed men. It was all clear, and yet it was all clouded, it was ages and an instant—a nightmare.

There was no air to breathe, only driving silver water which swept over in long sheets without end; there was no sound save the head-bursting scream of the wind which sealed eyes and ears, and held the *Quail* pushed over on her side as if she would never sit upright in the sea again.

My uncle's beard was tickling the back of my neck.

"Boy," he yelled in my ear, "now would I give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground, long heath, brown furze, anything. The wills above be done, but I would fain die a dry death. Oh! Oh!" His groans were awful. "I am seasick and dying. Oh, how seasick. Boy, creep away from me, but cling like a limpet to the rail. Go, boy, quickly."

I obeyed, because I always obeyed Uncle Erasmus, and wriggled myself from him. In the queer dark light I saw him turn his face to the rail and be very sick, which made me sick, too, so that, facing the rail as he had, I retched until there was nothing left in me and then lay there, limp and empty, at his feet and thrust up against the brown wood, regardless of the awful mess, not thinking or knowing anything any more, but just lying there limp, chilled to the marrow and powerless and soaked and battered into little bits whilst the *Quail* went mad.

After an endless, timeless time, I suppose I fainted, or something, because then there was nothing at all, not even fear or cold or misery.

III

The world began again as suddenly as it had stopped. The solid wind might have been chopped off with an axe. There was no more of it. The *Quail*, surprised, unsure, righted herself tentatively, sat up again. She was still tossed by great green white-laced waves, but that was only a matter of bouncing and rolling—not like before. She was a tumbled cork now, but we weren't going to be drowned. Since I'd been sick I felt much better and light and empty. I sat up, stood up, clung to the wet bulwarks.

I had never seen the wind before, but there it was now going away across the ocean in a solid wall. You could have measured to a foot just where its edge was. I clung staring after it, so glad that it had left us. The noise of the waves was as nothing compared with it. I could hear all the farm-yard complaining bitterly—sheep, pigs, cattle and hens protesting at the tops of their voices—and the half-drowned men on the main deck cursing like troopers and dragging the sticky blood and salt water off their hair and faces with clawing hands. They were staggering about, clinging to this and that, and wondering what had happened. Some of them were crawling out of the scuppers, saying most awful words, which I knew somehow, though I had never heard them before.

If my uncle should hear, too!—my uncle?

I turned about. Uncle Erasmus was raising himself to his

knees, one hand resting on the deck, the other clutching the bulwark. His golden beard and moustache, his golden hair, were plastered down, and all the tan had gone from his skin, leaving it grey. I was shocked to see him in such defeat. But, of course, he knew what to do. He knelt, sitting back on his heels, his face turned upwards, his big hands pressed flatly together, his eyes confident and yet pleading as if he asked a favour of a friend.

"O Lord," he prayed in a great voice, "who alone spreadest out the heavens, and rulest the raging of the sea, take this heavy burden from Your servant and his people. Truly Thou hast shown us that the way to the Promised Land is not a path of roses. We have learnt our lesson, O Lord. It was sharp, O Lord, but let it be short. My stomach, Lord, O Lord, my stomach! You will remember, Lord, before I became Thy bondsman how ill I fared in the matter of the voyages to and from Africa. O Lord, now that we have seen the Light, O Lord have mercy upon us. Out of the depths we cry to Thee, O Lord—Lord have mercy on us."

I knew it would be all right then, when my Uncle Erasmus had prayed so beautifully, and it was. He had hardly finished before the waves began to die down. All the wicked purple had gone away with the wind, and the blue came back. The sun beamed again, red and hot. White threads of steam began to rise from wood and canvas. Porpoises frolicked about us. I could feel the ship and all the people on her and all the wide world returning to life.

A big man in a blue sweater came scrambling along the deck. He was the sailor who'd been at the wheel that first night with the dragons crawling blue across his hands. His head was round and bald like a bladder, and his eyes goggling and brown as a seal's in the zoo.

"Mr. Quail," he shouted, "we only caught the tail of it. I know these blows they get round here. Nasty, but there y'are. We're safe and sound now, s'help me. In half an hour we'll be like we uster was. Proper nasty, it might have been! What a bit o' luck."

Uncle Erasmus, his prayer answered, was himself again. He stood up, strong and sure as a tree, and he looked at the man with his searching glance.

"Luck, sailor, to you," he answered, "God's will to me. It

makes no odds, sailor, which way one views it, but you seem a likely man, and there is work to be done. I appoint you my first officer, my mate. There are dead men here; there is a dead man below. What is your name, Mr. Mate?"

"Lord Nelson, sir."

I was horrified, thinking he was trying to be funny at my uncle's expense. But Uncle Erasmus did not even blink.

"A good name," he said. "A most admirable sailor's name."

"Yes, sir," said the man. "My mother was in love with a Navy man, but married a butcher who happened to be called Nelson, while t'other was on foreign station. He treated her nasty, the butcher did. Very nasty. So when I came along she christened me Lord Nelson to show she was still attached to the Navy. She did it to annoy, Mr. Quail, and believe me it did. She said if there was another it'd be 'Kiss-me-Hardy,' so there never was another and after a while my father died."

"Interesting," said my uncle, "very interesting. Your father was probably wise in his generation to die. Please join me on the poop, Lord Nelson."

"Ay, ay, sir," said Lord Nelson, and came up the ladder while the sea continued to die and the *Quail* steadied down, though the ladies were still below and the drenched farmyard still complained.

"Ah now," said Lord Nelson, as he looked about, "here's a proper mess here, Mr. Quail. Nasty. Real nasty. I didn't know it was so ruddy nasty as all this."

And, indeed, it was bad up there, with the great brown mast smashed across men and binnacle and wheel, and the sail lying in torn wet swathes. He sucked in his jaws, his lips puffed out, and he shook his head. "Old Umphelby," he said. "And Tim. Now that's nasty."

"And what's nastier," said Uncle Erasmus, "is that Captain Butterwick is lying dead down below."

Lord Nelson sucked his face again.

"You don't say?" he said. "You don't say? Ah, yes, that's nasty all right."

"Lord Nelson," said my uncle, combing out his beard with one hand and ruffling his drying golden hair with the other and forgetting he had ever been seasick, "you think we can trust the weather?"

"I know we can, Mr. Quail. It's over and gone. We mayn't have a capful of wind in the next month."

"God forbid," said my uncle.

"Agreed," said Lord Nelson, "for that'd be nasty. But you know what I mean?"

"Naturally," said my uncle, smiling in his beard again, which was good to see. "I think you are right, so the thing to do first of all, Lord Nelson, is to be rid of our dead. So long as we can trust the weather, they clutter us more than the broken mast. Let us therefore be busy, whilst the light holds, and let us commit our brothers to the deep that to-morrow may be a new day. We shall do all with proper feeling, of course, and to the glory of God, but let us busy ourselves. You will run up shrouds for three as quickly as may be, Lord Nelson, and I shall conduct the service shortly before sunset. There is just time enough." He thrust his hands down into the pockets in the front of his trousers and drew out lots and lots of new sovereigns. "Lord Nelson, Mr. Mate," he said, "people who appear in emergency are often forgotten thereafter. Accept this useless gold as a token of my remembrance."

"God a'mighty!" gasped Lord Nelson, and his brown seal's eyes glowed, "that's what I call proper, that's what I call sporting. That's nice. I thank you, Mr. Quail, sir, and you can count on me."

"I do," said Uncle Erasmus, tipping the gold into Lord Nelson's cupped hands.

"Did you ever!" said Lord Nelson. "Did you ever!" He stowed the jingling coins away, pulling in his cheeks and pushing out his lips. "Shrouds, Mr. Quail, yes, sir!"

"And planks and all the trimmings."

"Of course, sir. I've seen it done in real ships. Leave it to me."

"I do, Lord Nelson."

Away he went, as happily as if he were going to bake a wedding-cake.

My Uncle Erasmus smiled after him.

"The Lord has provided a good man there, boy," he said. "A child—witness his joy in the useless sovereigns—but one who will have the shrouds and etcetera ready in quick time. Do you find me callous, boy, about these, our dead?"

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, because I did.

"Well spoken," said my uncle, mightily pleased. "Never lie to me. And yet, boy, you must learn. Death is the only thing that matters at all, and the only thing that doesn't matter. Am I too clever for you, boy?"

"No, sir," I said, "because I have seen Captain Butterwick down there in the cabin."

My uncle rasped his hands together.

"The makings," he chuckled. "I knew it. And what did your first dead man teach you, boy?"

"He wasn't there, sir, Uncle Erasmus."

"Precisely," said my uncle. "A man's wife may leave him, and that is bad. A man may lose a limb, a man may lose his sight or his hearing, and that is worse. But while he is alive none of these things really matter, because far worse awaits him—Death, the end, the ultimate, which makes all these minor things trivial beyond words. And yet when Death comes we are quit of everything and gone away, so that it is Death which doesn't matter either, and what is left behind matters less than the hungry, troubled fly that walks the corpse's brow. I talk too much, boy. I talk above your head. The rest is silence. Boy, bring me a rum and my banjo, and the Book of Common Prayer. You will find the book on the shelf above my bunk, between the poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*."

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, and climbed over the mast where the dead men were and down through the broken hatch into the brown depths.

IV

The sun was still what looked like ten feet above the ruled line of the horizon. My uncle and Lord Nelson and those they ordered about had been very busy, and the bustle and hustle had been a tonic for everyone. Though the broken mast still lay across the poop, the *Quail* had been tidied up quite a lot otherwise, and the deck was orderly and sane again—and above all, flat. Cuts, bruises and sprains had been treated by the doctor and some helpers. Seeing him bustling

without fuss, I knew, as my uncle had said, he was a good doctor, in spite of the police court.

Now my mother and Aunt Grace and all the other ladies and the children had come up from below properly dressed for a funeral. They had taken a lot of pains because my uncle had ordered that it should be so, knowing it would be good for them to be occupied. With the men they stood about in their black gloves with hats on and veils and all, trying to look like people in church. All was proper and sad and yet at the same time cheerful no matter how they looked, because everyone was so glad that the storm was over and they were not seasick any more, or dead like the three in the neat white shrouds, ready on hatch-covers, with Lord Nelson and the men he had chosen standing by at attention.

Naomi was there, but they had spoiled her a bit, I thought, by dressing her in ordinary clothes and giving her ribbons instead of bits of string for her pigtails. But, of course, she couldn't have gone on living in a sugar sack. That wouldn't have been right. She was standing among the boys, considering the shrouds with round and solemn eyes. My little brother Jonathan, however, could feel the relief that was in the air more than the sadness, and my mother had trouble to keep him quiet, for he wanted to jump about and shout, thinking it must be a party.

The sky had been scrubbed quite clean again by the great wind, and now salmon pink clouds had formed, lovely long shimmering bands. The sea was silky calm and polished, so that you couldn't imagine it had ever been tossed in mad mountains and going to drown us all.

As his powder-monkey I stood behind Uncle Erasmus on the poop. He loomed up, grave and solemn and gruffly gentle, like the father of us all. In the midst of sending out his commands and whilst he sipped his rum—he didn't seem to like the first mouthful but then it was all right again—he had studied the small black book I had brought him.

"Brethren and sisters, we begin."

He raised his arm and lowered it slowly. The quiet deepened. Even the farmyard noises ceased, for now they were safe and dry and warm again the tired beasts and birds rested. They were snuggled down although it wasn't night.

My uncle began to read very simply, just as if the words flowed out of him without him having to say them.

"I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord. . . ."

It was like listening to the organ in a cathedral built of sky and sea. Being young then I had never heard the service before and the magic of the words swept into me in waves of music which made me want to cry like a girl and yet soothed me, too, and made me feel very brave, like a hero.

"We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain that we can take nothing out. The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

"Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

"Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay."

On and on marched the words whilst the sunset spread in glory.

"We therefore," said Uncle Erasmus at last, "commit their bodies to the deep, to be turned into corruption, looking for the resurrection when the sea shall give up her dead."

He jerked his head at Lord Nelson, and Lord Nelson grunted something. The hatch-covers were lifted to the rail and tilted and the three long white stiff bundles slipped over the side and fell into the sea with loud plops. It was only at that moment that I realized that the shrouds had held fat Captain Butterwick and Mr. Umphelby who had worked on the ferries and the sailor who had been at the wheel. People were crying and though I was too big to cry I could not see the ship or even the sky for a kind of silver mist.

Then my uncle spoke again, but quite differently, joyfully, almost singing, almost as if he had picked up his banjo to cheer us.

He said:

O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is gracious, and his mercy endureth for ever.

Let them give thanks whom the Lord hath redeemed and delivered from the hands of the enemy.

They went astray in the wilderness out of the way, and found no city to dwell in.

Hungry and thirsty, their souls fainted in them.

So they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them from their distress.

He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to the city where they dwell.

They that go down to the sea in ships, and occupy their business in great waters;

These men see the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep.

For at His word the stormy wind ariseth, which lifteth up the waves thereof.

They are carried up to heaven, and down again into the deep, their souls melt away because of their trouble.

They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end.

So when they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, he delivereth them out of their distress.

For He maketh the storm to cease, so that the waves thereof are still.

Then they are glad, because they are at rest, and so He bringeth them to the haven where they would be.

It was all so exciting and happy that my little brother Jonathan was not to be restrained any longer. "Hip, hip, hooray!" he piped at the top of his lungs.

A shocked gasp went up and my mother said "Jonathan!"

But my uncle flung his arms wide and gave a laughing shout. "Why not?" he cried. "The Lord has taken our brothers to his bosom, and delivered us from the storm. Why should He not hear our cheers? Come then, Hip-hip——!"

"Hooray!" yelled everyone as loudly as they could, delighted at the chance.

"Hip-hip——!"

"Hooray!"

"Hip-hip——!"

"Hooray!"

Even the ladies in their best hats and black gloves joined in; the children were all whooping and jumping about. The disturbed farmyard came to life with all its chorus.

It wasn't at all the kind of ending I had expected for a funeral, but it was grand just the same. Later on some of the ladies said "shameful!"—but my mother said quietly that there were times when she thought Uncle Erasmus really was inspired. And she was right, as she always was, and the other ladies were only mean old cats.

My uncle held up his hand for silence.

"A barrel of beer, and Madeira for the ladies, await you below, good souls and dolts," he announced. "We combine the wake with a festival celebrating our deliverance. Praise the Lord on well-tuned cymbals, praise Him upon the loud cymbals."

He snatched up his banjo and began to strum, shouting in a great roar that marching song of the Boer War: "Hurrah! Hurrah! for the boys of Kimberley." I think it was an American Civil War song first. They joined in lustily as they hurried down below, the more eager for their party because Uncle Erasmus would, as a usual thing, have no drinking aboard the *Quail* except where he and his rum were concerned, which, as he had explained to me, was quite a different matter.

He sent me for his glass now. Below there was much noise and laughter, but I could not even wait for a peep, being on duty. When I returned my uncle and Lord Nelson were smoking their pipes, leaning on the broken mast.

"That was a neat job of work, Mr. Quail, sir," said the new mate. "As neat a job as I ever seen. Jerked 'em out of it. Oh, very neat."

"The Lord moved me," said my uncle, modestly. "He works in a mysterious way. Thank you, boy. Your health, Lord Nelson."

"Very good health, Mr. Quail, sir," Lord Nelson nodded as if he had a glass in his hand, too, and sucked in his cheeks.

"Now touching the matter of this mast here."

"I been thinkin' about that," said Lord Nelson. "Thinkin' hard. It's nasty. I don't see there's any manner of hope of us ever getting her up again. I say, best thing would be to get to work to-morrow and dump the lot overboard. Only so much litter, Mr. Quail, sir."

"Agreed, agreed," said my uncle. "That shall be our first task to-morrow, and we sail on in a two-masted schooner for the Promised Land. 'Twill serve as well, 'twill serve." He

glanced at the sky. "I am no sailor but we can trust the weather at least to-night."

"That's certain sure," said Lord Nelson.

The red sun was just balancing on the edge of the sea, and the *Quail*, her sails still down, sat steady as if the water had turned to dry land. Down below they were singing "Yip-i-addy-i-ay."

My uncle seemed to be listening, but he wasn't for he turned to Lord Nelson and pointed the amber stem of his big pipe at him.

"You realize," he said, "that we are now entirely in the Lord's hand and must put all our trust in Him."

"Very nasty, ah, very nasty," said Lord Nelson, sucking in his cheeks.

"I differ from you there," said Uncle Erasmus, but kindly, with a smile.

"When I say 'nasty,' I mean, unless you know anything about it, Mr. Quail, sir, we haven't anyone aboard here who can navigate her, now Captain Butterwick's been took."

"I know less than a child about seafaring, Lord Nelson," said my uncle. "Less than a child—to clinch matters even our compass has been smashed, and the wheel destroyed. Had the captain been spared these smaller losses would have been a pity, but as things stand we are none the worse for them. The Lord shall be our captain and our helmsman and our compass-needle. We shall not fail."

"I'm sure I hope not, Mr. Quail, sir," said the mate who could not navigate, "but ah, it's nasty. Yes, it's proper nasty."

Uncle Erasmus turned to me.

"Your eyes, boy, they are healed?"

"Oh, yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus."

"Then, boy, remember that anything you hear as my powder-monkey is not to be repeated. You may, indeed, hear much unsuited to the general ear. Therefore I must demand your silence. Here is a jingle for you: 'My eyes are healed; my lips are sealed.' Say it, hand on heart."

I did so, awed.

"Good," he said, from his towering height. "Nothing is forgotten. You prefer ginger-beer to spring water. There is ginger-beer below. Your mother has orders to keep two

bottles for you when you come off duty. You are off duty now, this moment. Run, boy, run."

"Oh, thank you, Uncle Erasmus," I said, and dashed from the deck where the night was glooming down to the fun and lights and noise and the ginger-beer below.

CHAPTER III

I

THE calm Uncle Erasmus had prayed for and been granted was a boon. We hadn't realized, with the holiday he gave us over the dead men, how much damage had been done. Down below, though the ladies at my uncle's orders had managed to prepare themselves for the service, there was an awful mess to be cleared up afterwards. Everybody's things had been smashing about in the saloon and the ladies' cabin, and sea-water had poured down through the hatch. The ladies and men and children had been tossed in all directions, very seasick. Broken crockery and glass and furnishings were scattered everywhere. I think we should have had to live on deck, but for the calm—and yet we couldn't have done so without the calm.

In time the *Quail* was really shipshape. She had only seemed shipshape at the burial because my uncle had kept everyone on the go and they had done their best. Next day we realized how much hard work remained, and that was good for us too, after the party.

The broken mast was cleared away and Lord Nelson and the Swedish carpenter rigged a crude tiller in place of the broken wheel, and all kinds of other jobs were attended to, and we were happily busy as ants.

But long after all had been done the calm went on and the calm went on.

It was comfortable not to be seasick or frightened or flung about; it was fine to be able to sit and be easy, as if we were on holiday. But the quiet, the lull, pressed down on everyone. We had been used to the *Quail* going happily along and now

she just sat there on the still water, and the only noises were our own noises, and the ship was embedded in a glassy sheet of sea, and the sky remained clear and bright and empty, and the sun came and went, and there was darkness and then there were light, sunrise, noon and sunset, round and round and round.

II

The moon was lovely that night. It came up out of the sea, big and creamy white, with all its mountains and valleys and craters drawn on it. It was like a slide at a magic lantern lecture. The sea turned into a sheet of silver which glowed and glistened, and the *Quail's* decks were just as snowy, with the lines of the caulking between the planks ruled in charcoal.

The time crawled now because nothing happened, and the *Quail* just stuck there in the glassy sea. Everyone was on deck, trying to pass the heavy time, except Uncle Erasmus who had dismissed me from duty and was down below in his own cabin, darning socks, or reading Alfred, Lord Tennyson or Shakespeare or the Holy Bible, or playing his banjo and singing to himself rude and rowdy Boer War or bush songs.

I sat quiet in the shadow of a lifeboat, my hands round my knees, and my mother and Aunt Grace were talking together, as they liked to do, side by side in two chairs they had brought up from below, just as if they were sitting on the verandah of our house at home, except that my mother wasn't in her old rocker which she had decided was too frail and worn to bring.

She was knitting, her needles like lightning, and they had forgotten all about me.

"It seemed like heaven at first, Grace," my mother said. "I mean when that awful storm stopped. I've never really liked the sea, and I fancied it might be like that for the rest of our trip to wherever we're going. I'm glad it wasn't. This I admit, is heaven, now—but—I wouldn't wish Erasmus to hear me say this—do you think one could get tired of heaven?"

Aunt Grace smiled. Oh, she looked lovely sitting there in the creamy moonlight, like a marble statue in the National Gallery, only black and white instead of all white—black hair,

black brows, black lashes, black eyes and the rest of her marble. Though I had always liked the marble statues best in the gallery, I had never seen one prettier than Aunt Grace. You couldn't imagine her any way except just as she was, not younger, not older, perfect, to stay like that. She gave me the same feeling, in a smaller way, that Uncle Erasmus did—you couldn't think of birthdays connected with her. She could never have been an ordinary little girl with thin legs and pigtails, like, say, Naomi for instance.

"Sweet, you're sweet," she said in her voice which was like a creek in the bush running lirting over pebbles. "I'm afraid I never think of heaven. Earth is heaven enough for me. I like earth. What do we know about heaven, except we have to die to get there? That little 'except' means I simply don't care about heaven."

She sat smiling at the moon.

"You're a tease, Grace," my mother said, "and I don't believe half your naughtiness. But I've been wondering. This should be heaven. Supposing Erasmus is leading us to a real heaven—a heaven where we can live in peace and plenty and sunshine, where my children can grow and prosper—shall we be happy there?"

"I'm no good at riddles," said Aunt Grace. She took out her small blue enamelled case and lit a scented cigarette. Aunt Grace was like that, very modern. My mother hadn't liked it at first in the house with us children, but you could never stop Aunt Grace doing anything she wanted to because she was so gay and bright and harmless, like a flower.

The perfumed smoke hung in the air, strange and different from all the ship and sea smells, like the Arabian Nights. Below them, in the inky shadow of the boat, I breathed it in and watched Aunt Grace.

"You are," said my mother, "you're very good at riddles, Grace. So if you won't answer that—er—abstract one, here's one more personal."

"Oh, good," said Aunt Grace, sparkling. "Abstractions are beyond me, but anything personal——!"

"Very well," said my mother in the way she spoke when, though she was quiet and soft like a dove, she wanted an answer, "tell me truly why you came with us?"

Aunt Grace smoked her cigarette, looking at its golden tip

musingly. I could hear the people talking in their various groups on the snowy deck, their shapes looking more solid than they did in daylight and I could see the moon-dimmed glow of pipes and cigarettes. But none of them mattered. I was there, snug in the black hut of shadow with my dove-quiet mother and white Aunt Grace.

"Because I happen to be fond of you and the kids, I suppose," said Aunt Grace, "but, to be honest, for the adventure, first, of course, for the something new, for the unknown. I have only one career, my dear—a man. Can you imagine me marrying the Commercial Bank or any of the other men we knew, or were likely to know? And leading the life I would have led?"

"Yes," said my mother, "for it seems to me one man's very like another if you love him. I've seen it so often. And that makes any life all right." She paused quite a long time. "And yet," she added, "to speak truth, Grace, I can't see you with any of them or what we knew."

Aunt Grace nodded, mouth soft and curly, and flicked the gold end of her cigarette over the side.

"It wasn't in my mind when we sailed, but I think I shall marry Erasmus."

She said it so quietly, so naturally, just as she might have said she thought she would have another cup of tea. Her hands linked loosely on her lap, and she smiled at the moon. I was glad I sat in my hut of dark, for I was blushing. It seemed improper somehow, wicked, as if she had said she would marry Moses in our Bible, or even God. True, I had never been able to imagine Aunt Grace marrying anyone, for no one was good enough for her, and I'd always been glad when she sent them away, but that she should say such a thing about my Uncle Erasmus shocked me. It wasn't that he wasn't good enough for her, but he wasn't a man you said you would marry. He was different; you couldn't even imagine him as just a husband.

My mother felt that, too. She put her knitting down and stared at Aunt Grace, eyes wide open.

"Grace, what things you say!"

"And why shouldn't I say things?" said Aunt Grace, mocking and teasing. "Surely it's a worthy ambition? You admire your brother-in-law, Mary?"

"Oh, yes."

"You like me?"

"I love you, Grace." My mother's hand touched hers lightly and returned and picked up the knitting.

"Angel," said Aunt Grace. "Good angel. Then why should you mind me setting my cap at him? He appears to be the richest man in the world. He's far from as patriarchal as he loves to act. He's handsome as a god in his own flamboyant way. He is human and real and clever under all his nonsense. He's magnificent even. He has the child's heart, or he wouldn't have set us out on this schoolboy venture in such a schoolboy way, and the child's heart, it occurs to me, is the one essential to win a woman's love, or mine at least. I am not the mothering sort, but what woman doesn't like a little boy who's a giant? And I would bear him sons. So there, Mary."

My mother considered all this, needles flashing lightning again. I waited stiff and still, feeling worse and more tumbled about than when I'd been seasick.

"You're such a child, Grace."

"I'm twenty-one. A few years back I'd have been on the shelf almost. Erasmus is round about forty. He'll live to be a hundred."

"I know, Grace," my mother said, "I know. It's very hard for a simple woman to explain what I mean. But somehow it doesn't seem sense. You and Erasmus married, no! His whole life and soul are wrapped up in this venture. He doesn't need you. He's just a solitary fossicker who, having found one El Dorado, has to go on and find another. He doesn't need a woman, not even to cook for him or darn his socks. He doesn't need a woman like you. He wouldn't know you were there. He is just Erasmus, standing alone."

"Pooh," said Aunt Grace, "nobody stands alone, least of all huge men with golden beards. And as for his new El Dorado, when he finds it, what will he find? Disillusionment, boredom. Even all his gold cannot buy what he's seeking. And then he'll need one person—me."

My mother was troubled.

"Then you think the Promised Land isn't going to be what we hope?"

"Of course not, silly. How could it be? Gold can't buy escape from the world in the way Erasmus dreams."

"Then why are we here, Grace?"

"Because it is fun and an adventure and an experience and good for us all. We are being taken on a tremendous picnic, and when the game is done our Midas will be ready as anyone to call a halt. But he must look after his playmates then, and I shall see to that. Not that I think I'll have to. His heart is as golden as his beard or his sovereigns, and if he had not so much money I don't think I'd marry him, because he and his wife would be the first to suffer if he felt he owed restitution. But he has plenty—plenty for us all—and so I shall do him my great service. Otherwise, of course, when he gets back to the cities he'll be snapped up by some mercenary drab with nothing but greed and cunning. Since I'm frank, Mary, you may think me both greedy and cunning, but at least I have more than that. I could love the golden infant, Mary. I don't say I do, but I fancy I could."

"If you did," said my mother, "I don't know anything better his wealth could buy."

I was very young and didn't know about wealth, or what it could buy, and yet it seemed to me that my mother was right, though it remained a thing I couldn't get used to. I wished I could vanish; I couldn't. I tried to creep away; as soon as I moved they remembered me.

"Jeremy," said Aunt Grace, "if you ever repeat a word——"

Before I could open my mouth to protest my mother said: "Oh, shame, Grace. Jeremy!—as if he would!"

That gave me a lovely feeling.

Aunt Grace immediately looked sad and ashamed. She held out her hands to me, and I stepped out into the moonlight and took them in mine. They were cool and white like ivory, yet somehow warm and tingly, too.

"Jeremy," she said in her voice that was like a creek in the ranges, "how could I be so stupid and ugly? Forgive me, Jeremy."

"Why, there's nothing to forgive, Aunt Grace," I said, because of course there wasn't now.

She drew me, gently, just a bit towards her, and kissed me.

Her perfume stole into me. I had been kissed lots when I was little, and I had kissed girls at parties and in the garden sometimes when it was nearly dark, but that was my first grown-up kiss. Aunt Grace just rested her mouth against mine, and it was soft and gentle and rich. In a quarter of a second she was sitting back in her chair, but I was never to forget that kiss, though it meant nothing at all to her, as I knew then and know now. But it was something beautiful and wicked and bold, and it meant almost as much to me in another way as being a powder-monkey.

"Run along, Jeremy, to bed," said my mother, and she didn't offer to kiss me as she would have in the ordinary way. That was like her. She knew, though there was no harm in it, something unusual had happened.

I didn't run, however. I just went away where it was quiet, and leaned on the rail peeping over at the silver sea, and trying to get used to the idea that Aunt Grace was going to marry my Uncle Erasmus, but I couldn't. I thought about her kiss, and that it was like kissing a dewy rose, and I wished I had been so much older and could have married Aunt Grace myself, supposing I had found a lot of gold and had grown handsome like a god, but, of course, I knew all this couldn't be, so I decided I had better do as my mother had said and go to bed.

But, looking at the poop, I thought I would go up first and see if Uncle Erasmus were there, because I wanted him just himself again, and nobody's husband, not even Aunt Grace's. There he was, sitting in the silver, in his arm-chair which had been too solid to be smashed by the storm. He looked just the same and that made me glad. Lord Nelson was sitting beside him on a little canvas stool. They were both smoking, my uncle his meerschaum, and Lord Nelson a little black bit of a pipe. The moonlight was so bright that you could see the blue dragons crawling out over Lord Nelson's hands.

"Ah, boy, welcome," said my uncle, raising his forefinger. "I ask it as a favour, since you are not on duty—bring me a rum."

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus."

It was funny that he didn't have to tell me to bring one for Lord Nelson, too, but he didn't have to, and Lord Nelson

didn't expect it. My uncle's rum was something quite apart which belonged to him.

When I came back he did not send me away, which pleased me, because it was good to be with him in the smell of tobacco and rum without Aunt Grace's perfume or cigarettes.

"Nasty, that's what it's becoming this calm," said Lord Nelson. "Proper nasty."

"As idle," said my uncle, "as a painted ship upon a painted ocean."

"Beautiful put," said Lord Nelson, "but not so idle as you'd think, mind you, Mr. Quail, sir. I'm no officer, as I keep on reminding you, but I have been at sea many a year. Should know more, I admit, but don't. That's the way it is at sea, no responsibility. You leaves it all to the officers." He took some dice out of his pocket and tossed them to and from from hand to hand, with bony clickings. "No need to improve yourself. You do your job, and you blew your pay, and you do your job again. But this I do know, Mr. Quail, sir, that though to a landsman the like even of yourself we might seemed to be nailed down here, such is far from the case. We're moving all the time, sir, being carried hither and thither, being swept along by the tides and the currents of the sea. There's no landmarks here, such as you would be accustomed to, Mr. Quail, sir, but believe me we are not stopped dead. We're on the go, sir, on the go."

"I suppose you are right, Lord Nelson."

"Don't doubt it, sir, Mr. Quail. And, allowing for this calm, we're not drifting towards those islands you were aiming at. Be much hotter. North they are, up near the Line. If you want my opinion for what it's worth we're drifting more south and east, no north in it at all! Nasty."

"It is of small matter," said my uncle, "whether the Lord takes us by tide or wind, or whither. He takes us. I am at ease, but my people——? The tasks I have given them are not enough. True, the men can handle the ship well enough now and the women are busy with their sewing and chores and Mr. Paterson has started his classes, but they are young and fresh from their fleshpots, however so humble. They grow restive. I have never been a father before, and now I have a large family and must remember what children they are. Presently they will grow up, and the Promised Land will

suffice. But at present they are little and need games and toys. Those dice you rattle, Lord Nelson——?”

“Sorry, sir, Mr. Quail. A habit I got. Nasty. Had ’em twenty years. Sometimes lost a month’s pay with them, sometimes won a little fortune.”

“Devil’s playthings,” said my uncle, briefly looking stern, “but pretty toys. And toys are what we need. Silence, Lord Nelson, whilst I see if there is any guidance granted to me in the matter of these devil’s toys of yours. I believe there will be. The end will justify the means.”

Lord Nelson sat puffing at his little pipe, a block of a man with seal’s eyes, and I was quiet as a mouse. My uncle sipped his rum, and looked up into the silver heavens.

Presently he made almost a bow and drained his glass.

“Go now, boy,” he said, handing it to me. “Lord Nelson, to-morrow we run the Melbourne Cup for a purse of two hundred sovereigns.”

III

Breakfast in the saloon all along had never been a very cheerful meal, for though the men were good and always made up their bunks long before the food was ready, and the skylight was open, the place had been slept in and the night lurked in corners. The food was good, and those who had been assigned to help the cook and act as stewards did their work well. We were, however, people of the cities, not used to washing in pails of salt water and scrambling through dressing with lots of people round us. We had been reared to running water and a certain amount of privacy. Nothing like that now. Just a matter of getting awake and cleaned somehow and starting the day, so that everyone was very grumpy. Now with the calm and not knowing where we were going or if we were going at all, and the captain dead and all, we were glummer than ever next morning.

People had little to say, and that little bad.

“Not a breath of wind above.”

“We’ll be stuck here forever.”

"Promised Land, indeed! I'd give my right arm to be back in Woolloomooloo."

"Should never have sailed with only one real officer to run the ship."

"Should have gone back in that tug."

"I don't want to go to school to-day, Mummy. I'm sleepy."

Only things like that, and every remark depressed and irritated the others even more than the one who made it. I saw what Uncle Erasmus had meant about his family, and I was worried, but suddenly I learnt, too, what Aunt Grace had meant about my uncle being a child and playing a game. Or, I thought next breath, wasn't it that he was the greatest man in the world?

For Lord Nelson came clumping busily down the companionway with a big scroll of paper under his arm. He was accepted now as the man who had taken the captain's place though he wasn't a captain, and was met by a volley of grumblings and questions.

"Ah," he said, "proper nasty this calm, but it looks as if it's not going to be all woe and misery. By no means. Looks as if we're in for a bit o' fun. Looks as if some of us are going to be in for a slice o' luck."

He stood just at the bottom of the stairs, and gave a big, exciting wink. I believe Uncle Erasmus had told him just what to do, for he wasn't a quick-witted man himself, though a good one or he wouldn't have been chosen.

His manner, his words, gripped everybody's attention and for the first time since we'd sailed the saloon became animated at breakfast. Now questions were fired at him—not just flung by people who knew the dreary answer. Children were as excited as grown-ups; grown-ups were like children.

Lord Nelson didn't make any reply at all, but drew in his cheeks and puffed out his lips and looked important.

Then he went to a clear space between the bunks, and began to tack up the scroll of paper. Everyone was agog, be sure of that. Letting the scroll unfurl, he stepped aside with a kind of showman's bow. The paper was printed in big letters, red and exciting as a circus. It said:

AH, PROMISED LAND!

TO-MORROW AT 3 P.M.

Aboard Schooner *Quail*

THE

MELBOURNE CUP

will be run

For a Purse of

200 Sovs.

With added Place Money of

50 Sovs. & 25 Sovs.

THE GREATEST SPORTING GALA OF THE PACIFIC
BRING YOUR CHILDREN & LOOK YOUR BEST.

Never was such a hubbub. Everyone knew the Melbourne Cup, of course, and to think that we were having it aboard here, with all that money to be won, banished every misery. How was the money to be won? What did it mean? Questions were fired even harder at Lord Nelson, but he wagged his head knowingly, provokingly, laid his finger alongside his brown nose, winked again, and turning about clumped back up the brass-tipped stairs, leaving us to wonder and discuss and stare at the scarlet poster.

At first I was surprised to see that the date was to-morrow, for that was not what my uncle had said last night, because he had meant it would be run to-day, but then, listening and looking about, I realized once again his wisdom. He might be playing, but he did it with cunning and imagination. He was giving us more than the excitement of this mysterious race meeting; he was giving us all the fun of expectation, which is more than half the fun always—and also he was killing more time for us and himself, for in a tiny world like ours this was enough to keep us happily occupied for the interval.

"They won't be chocolate sovereigns like the kids get at Christmas neither," someone said.

"'Tis a small fortune, glory be to God," said Mr. Murphy. "A sum that would set a man with simple tastes the like of meself up for life. Ah, if I get me fingers on it."

I sat there, doubled up with excited chuckles. We were all marionettes and we danced as he pulled the strings. I knew he would be chuckling, too. Because, of course, it was absurd when you came to think of it. Here we were on

our way to the Promised Land where money wouldn't be of as much value as the shells the brown people used, but he dangled his golden carrots before our eyes and we were just a lot of silly donkeys eager to get a bite. I wondered that he hadn't made it more, and then I saw that that wouldn't have been clever. It would have given the joke away by laughing at the joke. The amount was just right, a sum we could understand as a lot of money which we should love to have, but not so much that it would make us see that money didn't matter any more.

That day and night would have been just like those that had gone before for what seemed like ages. Sea and sky were blue enough, but dull and empty. The porpoises had gone away, as if they couldn't be bothered with the *Quail* now that she was dead, and not even a gull came to pay a visit. It wasn't specially cold or hot; it wasn't specially anything, except just boring. Or it would have been but for my Uncle Erasmus. He didn't address us from the poop imploring us to put our faith in the Lord, and be patient. No need. The feeling that the Melbourne Cup was to be run to-morrow—had he called it the *Quail* Cup it wouldn't have been the same, and he in his wisdom, with guidance, knew that—was enough to keep everyone alert and alive.

The men were asking how you could run a horse-race at sea, and how the prizes would be won, and the women were asking the same questions but added to them the even more important question of what to wear. Uncle Erasmus was busy in his cabin most of the day, and I wasn't needed. Lord Nelson and Petersen, the big Swede, were with him. I wasn't jealous or cross, because I knew it was all part of the Plan. When they tried to get anything out of Lord Nelson he winked and said: "Wait and see. It's a mint of money." And Petersen just shook his blond head to and fro and looked blank and mumbled: "So? So? How should I know?" Uncle Erasmus had drilled them well; they were like parrots.

It seems, looking back on it, a great fuss about very little, but we were shore people who had been at sea a long time in a little craft, quite cut off, and oh! it was cunning.

The moon was bigger and brighter and people were saying how lovely and what a perfect evening it was and that it promised to be fine to-morrow. I doubt if they would have

noticed the weather so cheerfully if my uncle hadn't jogged them. There was more animation and chatter than there'd been for ten days, and even the ordinary children were allowed to stay up late, as if it were the start of the holidays.

A little after ten Uncle Erasmus appeared on the poop, and all talk ceased as he stood there so big and grand in the white light. You could almost feel them hoping that he wouldn't tell them about to-morrow so that it would be a surprise and they could keep on guessing. Being Uncle Erasmus, he didn't tell them a thing.

He just sat on the rail, as if he were all alone, cuddled his banjo on his lap, and having strummed a bit began to sing in his deep, golden voice: "Camp town Races."

Through the silver hush he sang, just to himself, but rich and clear:

"Camp town race track five miles long—
Doodah, doodah——"

And so on and on, making the doodah-doodah-deys so cheerful that you would never have thought he had prayed in his life, but had spent his years drinking rum and betting and being wild.

"I put my money on the bob-tailed nag,
Somebody bet on the bay."

Even I, who'd never seen a race in my life nor had a bet, felt it must be grand to put your money on the bob-tailed nag.

And when he had finished he didn't say a word, but, after a pause, struck the opening bars of the National Anthem, loud and solemn, and went off to bed. He had pulled the right strings. His family went off to bed, too, happier than they had been for ages.

IV

We had been as busy as bees, but now all was ready. The calm was the same as yesterday, but it was no longer tiresome. We wanted it to be calm. The other people had been sent below to have their midday meal with instructions not to appear again until they were told. They hadn't minded that.

Uncle Erasmus and I, Lord Nelson, Petersen and two of the sailors had made all the preparations.

Along the full length of the deck, on each side, long ladders had been white-washed on the planks with rungs about a foot apart. On the main hatch a purple cloth had been spread, and on it, glittering towers, were piled the two hundred sovereigns, the fifty and the twenty-five. On a small green-covered table nearby were wooden mugs and Lord Nelson's dice, and alongside the table a barrel. At the foot of the ladder on the port side were six brightly painted wooden horses with jockeys with brilliant jackets which Petersen had made down in my uncle's cabin.

My uncle took a last look round and handed me a gong.

"Go, beat it, boy," he said, "to the glory of the Lord who led me to invent this diversion. Open the door, boy, and beat that gong."

He went up to the poop, and I opened the door and beat the gong with all my might, making the loveliest noise ever heard. I banged it and banged it, and all the farmyard chimed in, so that the numb quiet which had held us so long was shattered into bits and even the still air seemed to be disturbed to let in other, fresher air from behind its golden wall.

They swarmed into the sunshine as if I had beaten the gong outside a beehive. The ladies were all dressed in their best, but not for a funeral now—for a race meeting. They wore their brightest colours and gayest gowns. The children had washed faces and their Sunday clothes, but not too stiff and starched because it wasn't a Sunday at all but a gala. The men had spruced themselves up. Some had spotless handkerchiefs tucked into their cuffs and stiff collars on. Some wore straw boaters and carried canes. All the slackness and sleepiness had gone and we were as excited as we'd been on sailing day, but now we had nothing to worry about—we only had to enjoy ourselves.

The horses and the markings on the deck puzzled and excited every one, and the little towers of golden sovereigns glinted dazzlingly. My uncle gave me a sign and I beat the gong. Every eye turned in happy inquiry to Uncle Erasmus on the poop, and smiles lit every face.

My uncle smiled, too, beaming down on his family.

"Children," he said, "this is a holiday. There is money to

be won, and fun to be had. I wish you merry. First form a file and take from that barrel one of the slips of paper. They are numbered. I have here six numbers chosen at random. Those who draw them will become owners of the fine steeds waiting at the barrier to run in the Melbourne Cup, but you won't know who the owners are until the winner is past the post. Begin now, and luck be with the worthy."

Jostling and laughing and chattering they did his bidding, forgetting all about storm and calm and the sea that prisoned us. Uncle Erasmus picked up his banjo and entertained us with pierrot tunes. He was too big to have to worry about his dignity. Each picked out a number, looked at the gold, looked at the horses, and hoped, but no one could know, and that was clever as I had known Uncle Erasmus would be. It took quite a time, but that didn't matter. We had plenty of time.

The game my uncle had been inspired to work out with Lord Nelson's dice was simple but exciting. He chose my brother Jonathan to throw one dice and Naomi the two, each in turns, under the eye of Lord Nelson who called the throws aloud. If Jonathan threw a five and Naomi threw a twelve, then the horse numbered five moved twelve rungs along the ladder, and so on. Sometimes one horse went ahead by leaps and bounds, only to stop suddenly and be overhauled by the others; sometimes they were all in a row. And you didn't know whether you owned a horse at all, or, supposing you did, whether it was leading or whether it was last. People began to favour certain horses, because they liked the look of them, or they seemed to be lucky, and presently they were betting among themselves, some with real money, some with tobacco which Uncle Erasmus issued each Monday, and the children with marbles or anything they might happen to have.

The noise was terrific, with people calling bets and cheering on their fancies or booing when their wrong horse had the luck. I did the moving of the horses, checked by Mr. Paterson, and I was shaky with excitement and responsibility, but I stole a glance up at my uncle, and saw him there stroking his golden beard, twirling up his moustache, and mightily pleased with himself for having smashed the silence and broken the boredom of the calm and beaten the sullen Pacific

Ocean with toy horses and little bits of bone with spots on them and piles of bright and useless sovereigns.

Along the deck they went, up to the bows, and down the other side. People were cheering on this one and that and laughing and hoping, just as if it were a real Melbourne Cup. Everyone wanted to know the winner, yet the longer the race went on the better it was. In the end, with people standing on hatches, clinging in the rigging, balanced on the rails, Number Two won with Six and One filling the places.

The clamour died down in a kind of sigh and we crowded the deck below Uncle Erasmus tense and hushed.

"Who holds Slip Thirteen?"

"Glory be, I do!" yelled Mr. Murphy. "And me cursin' the day I was born for the ill-luck of it. Have I won so?"

"You have drawn third horse," said my uncle, and it was characteristic of him to think of announcing the results that way round.

But Mr. Murphy didn't like it at all. He began to lament the manner he'd been led to believe he had the winner and the bad luck One had had all through, but they all laughed at him and told him he'd never had so much money in his life before and advised him to put a sock in it and go jump overboard and all kinds of cheerful nonsense.

The lovely thing was that Naomi won the second prize of fifty sovereigns. She went into a kind of mad dance, whirling round the deck, her pigtails sticking out, and her dress flying up so that her drawers showed. And she piped "Yip! Yip! Yip!" as loud as she could, and "She can't touch one of them. They're all mine. All mine to keep. None for her at all! Not one's for her! Oh, thank you, Mr. Uncle. Thank you!" Without waiting to be told she ran and took her prize, scooping it into her frock which she held out in front of her, not caring at all about showing more drawers than ever. She gave Jonathan and my mother one each and a handful to Mrs. Potter who had given her her pretty brown frock and her drawers which Elizabeth Potter had grown out of, and then she sat down suddenly, with her lap full of gold, and began to cry for happiness because she had been a poor, frightened little girl but now she was rich and her mother wasn't there. There was no need to worry about her tears.

"Number eighteen," called my uncle so that she wouldn't be troubled by people looking any more.

Even though you knew your number by heart you had to glance at your paper. Mr. Paterson, the schoolteacher, had one of his fits of coughing and for the moment we all thought he'd won. Men slapped him on the back so that he would get over the cough and speak up.

He didn't have to.

Aunt Grace stepped forward, and dropped in a kind of curtsy to my uncle up above. She looked more beautiful than ever in a scarlet dress with a hat to match, white feathers frothing on it, and a funny little parasol with a long handle which wouldn't have kept the sun off a baby.

"Erasmus," she said, her teeth white and shiny between her red, curly lips, "you must have second sight. However did you know I'd drawn eighteen?"

She sparkled up at him, cheeky and bold, still down in mocking homage.

"Where the filthy vice of gambling is concerned," said my uncle gravely, stroking his beard, "one should never suggest, even in levity, that there has been any shinanicking."

"But it would be so flattering to think so, Erasmus."

"You get enough flattery, child," said my uncle. "You are getting it now from all male beholders. Also two hundred sovereigns that I gave the best years of my life to find in the bowels of the earth."

"But tell me, Erasmus," said Aunt Grace, "now that I have gained all these sovereigns of yours, what shall I do with them?"

My uncle liked her for seeing how useless the money was. His eyes glowed approval.

"Well," he said, "we have a clever metal worker aboard. They might make an attractive neck ornament for the smoothest, whitest throat in the Pacific. I don't see any better use for them. Or, indeed, Grace, any other use at all."

A great shout of laughter greeted his words, for they consoled the losers completely, and it was a grand joke to remember how eager they had been to gain that gold which wasn't any good at all. But I didn't laugh, knowing what I knew. He shouldn't have said that about her throat.

Aunt Grace let the mirth die down, and then she said:

"No, Erasmus, I think I shall put it by for my trousseau." And she straightened up and turned away, twirling her little parasol cheekily at him, and took my mother's arm and went to collect her prize.

My uncle didn't mind what Grace said, but I did, because of what I knew.

"Boy," he called, "boy. Where's that powder-monkey?"

"Here, sir, Uncle Erasmus."

"Bring me a rum, boy, and the sock I am darning. You'll find it on my table."

I obeyed at the double, but when I brought the things to him in his chair in the stern I couldn't tell him that radiant Aunt Grace, whose mouth was like a moist rosebud, had decided to take over his darning and his wealth and he himself. And I was glad I couldn't.

"A fine game, that of mine, eh, boy?" he chuckled. "Did you enjoy it, boy?"

"Oh yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus."

"Me, too," he said. "All work and no play, boy. Yes, there is wisdom even in dice, given the guidance."

v

The happiness my uncle had created bubbled on, and now nobody hated him or the *Quail* or the voyage; no one wanted to exchange the world they knew for the gamble of the Promised Land. A gamble was always worth taking. Uncle Erasmus was too wise to let the evening of the great day seem flat. After supper he had the gramophone brought up on the poop. It was a magnificent machine—the best, of course, that money could buy—with a huge, blue, fluted horn, and we had a lovely concert in the moonlight.

Mr. Paterson sat with us children, and told us what the music was.

"That is Caruso singing," he would say in a reverent voice, with his thin face still, like a mask. "That is part of the Peer Gynt suite. I think I recognize the record. It's Mr. Landon Ronald conducting the New Symphony Orchestra." But we liked it better when Miss Gertie Miller, who was on the

post- and cigarette-cards, sang "I wore a little grey bonnet" from *The Quaker Girl*, and when Mr. Grossmith and Mr. Payne did "The Two Obahdiah's," but it was best of all when Mr. Lauder sang "I love a Lassie," and "Stop your tickling, Jock." Everyone joined in the choruses, then, even Jonathan and Naomi, and we clapped Mr. Lauder and ourselves harder than we had Mr. Caruso.

A lady was squalling. Mr. Paterson said, very reverently, that it was Madame Tetrzzini, but it still sounded like squalling to us, and there were giggles when Jonathan piped: "Cats! Throw a boot at cats!" And just as if somebody had, the record squalled away into silence.

For a moment, being so absorbed in the concert and quite forgetful of where we were, we thought the gramophone had broken down. A general "Ah!" of regret went up, and then we realized it wasn't that at all.

The *Quail* had come alive. She had heeled over suddenly, and flung the needle off the record. A wind harped in the rigging, and the surly sea had broken into a million sparkling smiles. It wasn't like the gale had been, but a friendly kindly breeze that ruffled the hair and was nice on the skin.

The loudest cheer of the day burst out, for this was the perfect climax.

"Hooray for Erasmus Quail!" they shouted. "Good on you, Erasmus!"—just as if my uncle had ended the calm for them. And I had the feeling he'd done so, though it had taken him longer than he had expected.

"Learn again, my children," he roared, "that prayer is always answered in the Lord's good time. Learn not to question His will. And now look lively, you lubbers. All the women below out of the way. Clear the decks for action. Let's see what you've learned in the past weeks. You should know your jobs by now. Hoist all sail. Paterson and Higgins get the gramophone below, and stow it carefully as you found it. Mind the records. Lord Nelson! Powder-monkey!"

Everything was a happy bustle and excitement now, with men shouting and ladies hurrying below, and the *Quail* herself dancing with joy at not being dead any more.

Uncle Erasmus stood on the poop, his legs straddled apart, his head thrown back to look up at heaven, the wind blowing

his golden hair and his golden beard and puffing out his blue shirt so that he seemed vaster than ever.

Lord Nelson and I took our places beside him. The sails began to creep up, white wings beating in the moonlight.

"The Lord is my strength," said Uncle Erasmus. Then looking down at us he added cheerfully: "A hell of a fine breeze, me lads, a damn fine breeze."

"Nice," said Lord Nelson. "Very nice. And looks as if it'll hold."

"The sea is His, and He made it," said my uncle. "This breeze has got to hold, and it will. A man of smaller faith might have been sore afraid by now, Lord Nelson. By my reckoning we have only enough fresh water left to last ten days with care. We shall start rationing the water tomorrow. I didn't want to do it before because it would have alarmed my children who have not faith. Now, with the feeling that we progress, they will not mind so much."

"And after the ten days?" said Lord Nelson. "Ah, that may be nasty." He sucked in his cheeks and wagged his head.

"O ye of little faith," said my uncle. "Before the tenth day we shall have been brought to the Promised Land."

"I hope so. Or it'll be nasty. Proper nasty."

"Before the tenth day," said my uncle with certainty.

"Wind's due west, Mr. Quail, sir. What kind o' a course were you figuring on trying to steer, if I might make so bold?"

"No course, Lord Nelson. We shall go with the Lord's wind—it shall take us where He wills."

"If you must have it so, Mr. Quail, sir," said Lord Nelson, head wagging again. "But even a bit of a course might be a help, with the water short and all. Even a guess at a course, Mr. Quail, sir."

"Silence, Lord Nelson," said Uncle Erasmus sternly. "Since when have the guesses of men been as potent as the guidance of the Lord. There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Lord Nelson gave it up.

"You certainly always seem to be right, Mr. Quail, sir," he admitted. "You're a marvel, you are. But if you just happen to be wrong this time—ah, then it'll be nasty."

My uncle had closed the discussion. He stood looking

forward, stroking his beard in serene satisfaction. Lord Nelson went unhappily to the crude tiller which had replaced the wheel.

"See what can be done," my uncle said, rather to himself than us. "These poor creatures of the cities and the land in such a little while are almost sailors."

And, in truth, the *Quail* had spread her wings very quickly, and was flying along now before the wind, skimming and bouncing, her bowsprit lifting and dipping and pointing on.

My uncle sang "A Life on the Ocean Wave," and his eyes and mouth were happy and sure.

"Boy," he said, "bring rum. Stay, boy!" He considered a moment. "No, boy—no rum. Not until we see just how strong is the wind the Lord has chosen to send us."

The wind was kind. It blew gently and yet steadily and the sea did not rise enough to trouble us. Next morning we were still slipping along. The rationing of the water caused some alarm, but it was hard to be glum and afraid with the sea so blue and friendly and the feeling that at last we were heading for our journey's end. If any tremor of doubt arose the remedy was there on the poop. One glance at my Uncle Erasmus, happy as a schoolboy, singing, twanging his banjo, striding about, put heart into the most timid.

The breeze was worth all my uncle's prayers. It carried us on and on and on.

The morning of the ninth day came in with noise and excitement on deck above, and when we tumbled up, the bowsprit stabbed at a spot of green on the very edge of the horizon where nothing had ever been before except the welding of sea and sky.

I was with my mother. She bent down and hugged me to her.

"Oh, Jeremy," she said. "My Jeremy!" And she was laughing and crying at the same time.

Even the speck of green could not make us forget Uncle Erasmus. We turned from it to see what he was doing.

Uncle Erasmus was kneeling on the poop, his head bent down so that his beard was pushed against his chest, his hands clasped. We had never seen him look humbled and awed and bowed and grateful before.

So we knew the speck of green was the Promised Land.

BOOK TWO
THE ISLAND—1914

CHAPTER IV

I

DRAWN by our eager eyes, the island came towards us as if it were a kingfish hauled in on a line. The *Quail* didn't seem to move forward at all.

Dr. Barnaby joined my mother and me where we stood at the rail. He was a short man with a pink face and a shiny bald head, so that he looked like a very large baby who had just come out of a hot bath. His eyes were kind and brown. He wore, even at sea, doctor's dark clothes, and would have been most dapper if he had not always a thread of snuff spilt down his waistcoat—which seemed wrong, particularly when it stuck on his gold watch-chain so respectable and bright otherwise.

"Your brother-in-law is a remarkable man," he said to my mother, speaking briskly and rubbing his clean hands in a pleased way. "A most remarkable man. This, really, is a memorable hour. I'll be frank with you, Mrs. Quail. When the captain died, though I kept my opinion to myself, I thought this expedition doomed to disaster. Mind, I had faith in Erasmus Quail and in his faith. Faith moves mountains, ma'm. Could it—I asked myself privately—plot our course across the wilderness of the Pacific Ocean? No, was the answer I found in my heart. Ma'm, I was wrong, and I'm glad I breathed no word. There is his justification! In my view—a miracle."

"I agree, doctor," said my mother, "a miracle! Do you think it will be a nice, healthy island, doctor, for children?"

"Now that I see it there, rising incredibly from this terrific expanse of water—found without compass, navigator or

knowledge—I feel positive it will be healthy and happy for everyone. Or what, ma'm, are miracles for?"

My mother nodded smiling agreement, comforted.

"Queer there is no sign of life, doctor."

"If I may be selfish, ma'm, I'm mightily pleased at that. I am a good doctor, but, between ourselves, outside the law at the moment. I speak frankly, ma'm, knowing you will respect my confidence, knowing you to be a lady of the world. In this moving hour I must tell someone of what Erasmus Quail did for me. It begins as an old and sordid story which I needn't inflict on your ears, but Erasmus Quail actually found me standing in the dock on a criminal charge. He listened to me, and he watched me with those seeing eyes of his, and he pushed his great nose out, and when I was remanded on bail of a thousand pounds—which they thought I couldn't raise—he stood up in court, a stranger, a man I'd never set eyes on before, and he went surety for me. He lodged a thousand sovereigns with the court, and, for the moment, I was free. I didn't know how to thank him; I didn't know what to say. It was simply incomprehensible. We were outside in the street and I was still stammering my thanks, when he took my arm and said: 'Come with me to the Promised Land. You are needed; you are chosen.' I admit I thought I was dealing with a wealthy madman. I tried to argue, to protest that although the bail had been paid it wouldn't be ethical for me to go away with him. I shall not repeat his forceful language, ma'm, but he declared he had paid my debt to society up to date, and that I should pay my share through the ministry to which I had been called. I was dazed, dumbfounded; I was saved. He picked me up in his strong arms—of course, I don't mean literally—and carried me off. I felt, if you will excuse the simile, as serene and secure as I had in my mother's womb. So here I am, and there is his Promised Land."

My mother looked at him for a space, straight and stern as she could, though she was quiet as a dove, and then she put her hand on his arm an instant.

"I think we are lucky," she said, "that Erasmus had another inspiration. I speak as a rather timid woman and a mother going into the unknown. We shall need a physician, a healer—and in you we have one."

Dr. Barnaby's pink face puckered up. He made her a chubby bow, not sweeping or gallant, just deeply grateful.

"Ma'm," he said, "ma'm!"—and that was all he could say, and all my mother needed, and all I needed too, if it came to that, but, of course, I didn't matter.

By now the island had been drawn nearer, and we could see it was high at one end, and sloped down. Against its cliffs the waves that cradled us gently beat up in sudden wrath, their blue boiling instantly into the whiteness of snow. In the warming sky above seabirds hung in a cloud.

With the empty horizon running ruled round the rest of the world, a very small island.

Everyone was standing quietly, staring and staring, trying to find out what kind of place my uncle had brought us to, but they couldn't tell. No cheering, no excitement. Only doubt and questioning. Because now all these people were beginning to realize a lot of things they hadn't when Uncle Erasmus had swept them all together and away from the cities and the lights and the world.

Most of them weren't very clever or successful or wise or strong, and he was such a powerful broom.

The children, who didn't have to worry, formed a kind of snake, with hands on each other's hips and marched round the deck, first of all just making a noise, but presently chanting: "We go on land, we go on land—Grand, grand, grand, grand!" Looking back, hearing its gay lilt still, I wonder who started that song and made up the tune. Nobody ever asked; nobody every knew. I suppose it just bubbled out of all of them, and out of the moment. Round and round they went, singing as if they had known the song all their lives.

And that was a great help to the grown-ups. They laughed, and began to chatter, loudly to be heard above the noise, loudly to keep up their spirits and drown misgivings.

I was surprised about the island myself, having read a lot in real books from the Public Library, and knowing just what it should have looked like. There ought to have been palms and coral sands and a lagoon, with other atolls dotted about and canoes paddled by friendly Tongans and brown thatched huts and all those things.

Instead here was this slab of rock and earth with green

on top and the whirl of birds above and the foam below, and nothing else.

"It's true," said my mother dubiously, "we shall be on dry land again."

"And good land, I should say," said the doctor. "Not quite as I expected—possibly better. It looks hardly tropical at all, and that may well be a good thing. The true tropics are not white man's country. Oh, yes, romantic, ma'm, but you would be surprised—mosquitoes, malaria, hookworm, leprosy. Ma'm, I could make your blood run cold. I know nothing—I am as an unborn infant in this venture—but I believe my surgery may be less crowded than I feared."

"Oh, I pray so, doctor."

The doctor took a pinch of snuff, and a few brown grains trickled down his waistcoat.

"It is an odd commentary on the way in which one had viewed this strange adventure," he mused, "that I have only brought a mere few ounces of snuff."

"You mean, you thought it would be over very soon?"

"Say rather I did not believe, or did not think at all, like the rest of us, ma'm. Now I begin to regret my lack of faith." He sighed a little. "It occurs to me that we may all miss our various snuffs, though so far as my actual brand is concerned I accept that it is a foolish and uncleanly habit."

He made little, apologetic brushing movements at his fine waistcoat, but the brown track remained.

My uncle called me, and I brought him his rum. He stood by Lord Nelson who was at the tiller. They too gazed ahead at the island we fished out of the bright waters.

"Looks proper nasty to me," said Lord Nelson, moving his hands a little on the bar of wood so that the dragons stirred.

"Perilous seas and fairy lands forlorn," said Uncle Erasmus, smiling though his words were sad. "What could be more beautiful?"

"I wouldn't go against you, Mr. Quail, sir, but still I say, nasty! In my time I been to Norfolk Island and Lord Howe. Both very like this here, if you want my opinion. Not at all like that Tonga Group you were making for. Right enough. All very well. Not saying a word against Norfolk

or Lord Howe, Mr. Quail, sir. Nicest places you could wish, if you don't mind the quiet life. Ah, but, Mr. Quail, sir, when you approach them islands you see the smoke of chimneys risin', kind and friendly. You can smell folk there, sir, in the very breeze. You can see the little houses and the fields. You can see Man, Mr. Quail, sir, miles and miles away. But we're drawin' in closer every minute now, and, without impertinence, can you see anything such as I've mentioned? I venture to say, no! Mr. Quail, sir. And I may be wrong, but I call that nasty."

"Nasty?" smiled my uncle, and finished his rum.

"You can't say it's nice, sir, Mr. Quail, sir. Not no one at all."

"We need no one, Lord Nelson. We are all we need. If I had ever craved reassurance, a sign, indeed I have it now. My human mind could think of nothing better than the Friendly Islands. He in His wisdom is so much wiser. We did not need kanakas and coconuts. We wanted a clean canvas to paint a new world on. There it is. His gift. Blessed be His name."

All at once the island had grown very big and forbidding, like a fort. The *Quail* was no longer the main thing in the globe of blue. She was a dinghy hitched to a tremendous liner.

Lord Nelson waited a respectful moment and then spoke again, stubbornly.

"It isn't only a matter of finding this here island you didn't know you were looking for, Mr. Quail, sir, meaning no offence, but how do you imagine we get ashore? No anchorage. Look at them cliffs, look at the sea breaking on them sheer rocks. With the fresh water the way it is, what's to do if we can't get ashore?"

My uncle gave me his glass, and stood quite forgetful of us and everything. He didn't go down on his knees, but I thought he was praying. Lord Nelson thought that, too. We waited.

"So?" he said, presently, as if he understood something, and returning to us: "Lord Nelson, do what is necessary to take us round that end of the island—the lower end—and, O doubting Thomas, you shall find your answer."

"I certainly hope so, Mr. Quail, sir," said Lord Nelson,

unconvinced. "Nobody more, I do assure you, for after all m'years at sea I'd hate to be drowned scrabbling my fingers red raw on sea-weedy rocks, or going mad from drinkin' o' salt water."

Obedient, but still anxious, he leaned on the tiller, and called a few orders, and the *Quail* swung round, as if she was no longer eager merely to get to the island but had made up her mind about her particular destination. They looked up from the deck in inquiry. My uncle smiled down benignly, making them happy that he was in charge and knew just what he was about.

As we turned and ran down the island, slanting in closer, Jonathan raised a sudden cry: "Christmas trees, hooray, Christmas trees!" Somehow that was a heartening discovery. It was as if we'd been expecting to be dazzled by bright orchids and swamped in jungle where monkeys and strange creatures lived, and had found instead familiar, homely things right out there in the Pacific. Of course, those were pine trees!—then there might be ordinary grass and perhaps even roses and daffodils and wattle and all the plants and flowers we knew.

"That brother of yours—who once upon a time said Quack! Quack!—has the makings, also," said Uncle Erasmus, and I knew again what a great man he was never to forget the littlest thing and to know the value of the littlest thing, and I wasn't jealous of Jonathan.

We came round the end of the island where it sloped down, but still even I could see there was no place for us, and Lord Nelson cocked an eyebrow in concern and inquiry at my uncle, who said: "Just take us along this coast, Mr. Mate."

The *Quail* leaned over and danced on. We rounded a headland, and the rocks and the surf defied us; we rounded another and there was no change, but when we nosed round the third there beyond was the bay. It was welcoming and kind with a white beach. The pines marched down the slopes almost to the edge of the sands. Cleaving between the plummy, dwindling hills was a creek, almost a river. It jumped down in sparkling cascades, and, where it reached the sand, it cut a deep, wide channel until it slipped into the sea.

"O doubting Thomas, you didn't expect that, did you?" My uncle turned fiercely on me. "Nor you, boy. Admit it!"

Lord Nelson, busy with the tiller just sucked in his brown cheeks, but I said, apologetically: "No, sir, Uncle Erasmus"—for I could not lie to him.

"Nobody did," said my uncle joyfully. "How could they? Least of all me, a poor old bushman and no sailor, save as the sailor of the Lord. But there it is, and all grows clear, which is just as it should be for children who are humble and await their Father's guidance in blind certainty. There is our answer and solution. Lord Nelson, Mr. Mate, the wind seems to suit well, as it would, naturally. You will drive the *Quail*, Lord Nelson, straight up into that deep creek."

"But that'll put her aground, sir, Mr. Quail," said Lord Nelson shocked, as if he'd been told to commit a crime.

"It will."

"We'll never get her off!"

"Never," my uncle agreed calmly. "Never, my good Lord Nelson, but we shall be snug and housed there even better than if we were in a dock, and we shall step ashore from this weariness of the sea. Lord Nelson, for once you are inspired. Inspired, man, you hear me? Your hands, your eyes, are cunning beyond those of men. Drive us straight up into that haven where we would be. Take us into the embrace of the good shore. Have no fear. You can't help doing so."

"Barmiest order I ever heard," Lord Nelson grumbled, and yet he straightened and tensed as I had never seen him do before. "With the wind the way it is," he went on to himself, not us, "and the ship the way she is, and that there stream the way it is, b' the Holy Sailor I do honest believe I can do it."

He wasn't himself any more, but just part of the *Quail*. He didn't speak again; he didn't seem to breathe. The schooner went slipping in and in to the mouth of the creek and up into it as smoothly and naturally as a duck settling into its nest. There was hardly a jar; there wasn't anything frightening. We just weren't sailing any more. The soft white arms of the island closed in on either side and held her snug.

Everyone burst out cheering.

II

Ah, nobody but Uncle Erasmus could have ended our voyage like that!

Not just coming to anchor, not just tying up to dock or jetty, but in such a strange yet proper fashion, so that there was nothing humdrum, so that the *Quail* herself, which he had bought with golden sovereigns, was welded in that first instant into the Promised Land and became a part of it.

"Get the sails lowered and stowed immediately, Lord Nelson," he said, and walked down into the stern.

Lord Nelson blinked as if suddenly awakened, and said: "Coo, lumme, a ruddy marvel!" He looked at the land which hemmed us in and wiped his brow. "Well, I never," he said. "Well, I never." Then he gave himself a kind of shake and went to the rail and shouted his orders, trying to make himself believe that it was natural to be furling the sails of a ship which was a ship no more, but a house built into a beach.

Though the seabirds stormed above, parrots and pigeons of the land were fluttering about, too, and we could hear the wind sighing in the pines, as if we were on an old farm in the country. Most of the stream must have been running under us but the rest flowed out on either side in silver fans, shallow and pretty, a kind of water garden. With the cryings of the myriad birds and the excited voices and the sails coming down all was noise and confusion, and yet in a strange way there also seemed to be a deep quiet. It flowed out of the island, where, you couldn't help knowing, no one had ever been before.

Of course, I didn't follow my uncle, because he wanted to be alone, but I peeped round at him. He was standing there, looking strong but tired, very tired. I could not help understanding, child and all that I was, that this voyage which he had seemed to play as a giant schoolboy might play a game, had been a serious and solemn business to him, a grave and perilous undertaking which he had carried alone on his broad shoulders. Now that he had reached his goal he needed a breathing space, even if it could be only a moment.

I knew he was crying, though his back was turned. I had never seen a man cry before, and it was almost impossible to admit that my uncle was doing so, but because I loved him and felt why he cried, it wasn't rude to keep on watching him. I wasn't staring in mere curiosity. In truth, I could hardly see him for he turned misty and I cried with him, I am proud to admit, in happiness and relief.

But I hoped we would be over it when the others wanted him.

Uncle Erasmus saw to that. The lowering of the sails and the general confusion gave him just long enough. He pulled out the huge red bandanna handkerchief, and as he did so a sovereign spun up into the air, glittering in the morning sun, and fell down into the creek astern. There was something so right and funny in that happening at that moment that I laughed and wiped my eyes hurriedly and sniffed my nose clear. My uncle trumpeted twice into his handkerchief and turned about and came marching back, big and erect and powerful, an emperor in blue shirt and dungarees.

He paused before me and looked down.

"Powder-monkey!" he said, so gently, so sweetly, that I knew he was pleased with me and that I had done well and hadn't failed him.

He put his hand on my head for a moment, and I felt as if I was growing up to twice, ten times, my real height under his touch.

"Thank you, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, and I was much too big a man to cry now, even from happiness.

He went on across to Lord Nelson, who was watching that all was shipshape, and he said nothing at all to him, but he gripped his right shoulder for a moment in his strong fingers, and Lord Nelson said nothing at all to him, either, but raised his hand to his brow in a queer, old-fashioned gesture, like a countryman in a picture touching his forelock, but they understood each other, just as Uncle Erasmus and I did, and Lord Nelson was more pleased than he had been when he was given all those useless sovereigns.

They were hushed and expectant and lost on the deck now, unable to grasp it all, stunned by the island which was to be our home, hearing the empty silence beneath the noise of birds and trees and sea, wanting Uncle Erasmus.

He was there, immediately.

"My children, good people," he said, speaking quietly and gravely and without any gestures or flourishes, "this is a memorable moment, for we have come to the Promised Land as I said we would back in the world. Have no fears. I do not intend to read the Bible to you, or demand hymns or harangue you. But for a brief minute you may feel inclined to go on your knees and give thanks for this fortunate end to our voyage, this beginning of a new, and, let us be sure, better life. The form your prayers take is no concern of mine, but if you wish to pray let it be from the heart and then you will say more in a minute than you might in years. No one need kneel, no one need pray, who doesn't wish to. I just thought you might feel that way inclined."

He made a small gesture as if he gave them a present and, without waiting to see what they did, went down on his knees.

I paused, however, because he had told me that I was to be the chronicler of all this. It was the queerest thing: all the folk he had swept together, men, women and children, people from bush and city, of all creeds and no creeds, the sailors, even the children, even the littlest children like Jonathan who didn't know what it was all about, knelt and bowed their heads. They didn't look silly and self-conscious like people often do at church; they didn't glance about to make sure everyone was doing the same thing—they just knelt and bowed their heads. Even Lord Nelson, who had probably never been on his knees before.

No human sound at all; only the noises of the island which had been going on for centuries but had never been heard by human ears till now. It was a lovely thing to see, but having done my duty, I knelt down, too, and since I couldn't think of any prayers fine enough of my own I just said the Lord's prayer and I was glad it was my own prayer and we weren't gabbling and mumbling it all aloud while Uncle Erasmus boomed it out.

But, of course, my uncle was too wise to have had us pray like that just then.

I had just finished when there was a big bang on the gong which I had beaten on the day the Melbourne Cup was run. I hadn't noticed it was on the poop, but my uncle had seen

to it that it was there, and now he had given it a single, great stroke which went bounding away into the island and came echoing mellowly back.

"Seconds out of the ring!" he bellowed.

And we all stood up from our prayers—laughing.

Uncle Erasmus laughed with us.

"All the same," he said, then, "there's method in my madness. We begin a fight—a fight for very existence. We need not, however, let that make us miserable, since we should be fighting for existence wherever we were, and not in a setting like this. I name this Promised Land, Quail Island. Do you agree?"

They cheered and laughed anew. He played on them far better than he did on his banjo.

III

It was Naomi's idea. She signalled it to me with little monkey faces and sly movements of her brown, quick fingers. The grown-ups were enjoying their breakfast, and, though excited and curious about the island, they were really glad in secret to dally with something so familiar as this meal. Outside the brown box of the saloon to-morrow and to-morrow waited—unknown to-morrows with unimaginable possibilities—and it was easier and happier to pretend for the moment that we were still only on our way to the Promised Land.

Unnoticed in the high-pitched chatter and uneasy animation, Naomi and I slipped out of the saloon and up the stairs to the deck. The farmyard was noisy, smelling the land all about. Only the bright-eyed birds saw us. They were everywhere, in the rigging, lining the rails like beads, strutting the planks. They were not a bit afraid of us, merely interested and talkative. It was as if they had taken over the *Quail* from her humans and made her into their club.

A rope ladder had been lowered over the side, though no one had used it yet. We took off our shoes and stockings, and tied the laces so that the shoes hung round our necks.

"Look lively, or they'll catch us," said Naomi, her face mischievous as an imp's.

She tucked her dress into the top of her drawers, and went over the side and down the ladder. I followed. It was secret; it was naughty; it was fun.

"Oo," said Naomi, "lovely!" She had stepped down into the water which came right up to her drawers though she pulled them as high as they would go. "Much nicer than that sticky old salt stuff." She scooped some up and sluiced her face.

I rolled my pants up, and joined her. We were outside the *Quail*, and that was queer in itself—to look up at the black wall of her hull behind which we'd lived so long. And the feeling of the fresh water and the clean sand under our toes was fine, too.

"Come on, Jeremy," she said. "We're going 'ploring all on our own. Come on, come on."

I knew there'd be trouble when we were missed, but her hand was quivering in mine and her eyes dared. If a bit of a girl could risk it, I could. We ran together through the shallows and up on to the dry warm beach. Our feet were clumsy, missing the smooth yet unsteady deck. Presently we were in among the trees, slipping on a bouncy carpet feet-thick made of the pine needles—centuries and centuries of needles. But it was criss-crossed with long strands of coarse sharp grass which cut our soles. We sat down and put on shoes again.

So lovely there among the pine trees, so free after being shut up all that time in the ship, that we were bubbling with happiness. The best picnic ever, even though we had nothing to eat. Naomi pointed at the *Quail*, and began to giggle. The *Quail* did look funny sitting down there in the sand—a house with tall flagpoles growing out of her roof—and inhabited only by the birds and the farmyard animals. But it wasn't just that that made us laugh so much. It was the happiness of everything. We clung to each other on the bed of needles and laughed until we were almost crying.

Then Naomi said, wiping her nose and eyes on her sleeve, "Oh, I love it, I love it, I love this place. Now she can't ever get me any more," and I hugged her to show that that was true. "But it does seem a pity," she went on, "me

with all this money, and no ice-cream carts, no shops, nothing to spend it on." She took five sovereigns from her pocket, and played with them. "I got rich too late," she said, "but it doesn't matter. Being rich isn't everything. You can be rich and unhappy. I don't know how or why, but you can. And I'm rich and happy, too, even if I can't spend my money, so what do I care? Oo, Jeremy, look." She gestured about.

In all the fun we hadn't noticed, but we sat in the middle of a ring of brown birds like tiny, pretty, glossy hens. They had scarlet bills and round black eyes, and there were hundreds of them, all studying us as if we were the queerest things they had ever seen, as, indeed, I suppose we were. Their eyes seemed to be popping out of their heads.

"Shoo!" said Naomi, and waved her arms.

The brown hens did not budge, but stared the harder and made small noises in their throats, as if they were saying: "Well, did you ever! Now whatever can they be?"

Their scrutiny made us feel quite embarrassed. I should never have thought that birds could do that, but those little hens could—there were so many of them and they were so intent. We scrambled up and went on, hand in hand. They made just enough room for our feet, rather crossly, flapping bits of wings, and then fell in behind us in a procession as if determined to see what we were up to. We shooed and waved but they didn't mind. Another fit of the giggles seized us, and we scrambled on, still trailing our feathered escort. They were very talkative, too, discussing us in sharp undertones.

And when we broke into a run they pattered after us, more delighted than ever.

It made the Promised Land seem such a friendly place where even wild birds had no fear.

In every way it was lovely. The tall pines were like pillars holding up a roof of purple-blue. Not just a dead roof. It sighed and harped and stirred constantly, weaving and waving, so that we might have been in a belt of air walking along the bottom of the sea with the Pacific surging above our heads. But it wasn't cold and horrid as the bottom of the sea would have been; it was warm and yet crisp and all dappled with sunshine.

As we climbed the shoulder of the hill we could see the stream, in which the *Quail* had come to rest, rippling and laughing along, quicksilver. Parrots were fluttering about, all pretty greens and reds. That was like Australia, but they weren't rosellas or any of the kinds we knew, so though we felt at home it was in a new home.

Naomi understood this when I said it to her. She was very quick at understanding.

And presently we had reached the top of our hill though the island still went on beyond, and somehow we knew this was far enough and we sat down. All the little tame, wild hens sat down, too, and huddled down together as if a bit out of breath. They still gossiped about us and watched us with their knowing eyes, but they didn't worry us any more because by this time we were all on a picnic together.

Through the trunks of the pines we could look down on the beach, and now it was alive with little figures and the birds were storming above in excitement. It looked as if a holiday train had arrived at some quiet resort in the bush, but it looked like something else, too, and for the moment I couldn't think what. Then I knew.

"From here," I said, "it's just like Noah's Ark—look at the little people and the little animals on the deck. Why, Naomi, isn't it just like Noah's Ark?"

"Yes, Noah's Ark," said Naomi. "I used to see them in shop windows. But, of course, I never had one. Now I'm rich I can't buy one and don't need to, because we have the best Noah's Ark of all. Funny!" She sat a moment thinking how funny it was, her face sad, and then she brightened up and went on: "And Mr. Uncle is Noah. I do think Mr. Uncle has been awful clever to bring us to this Promised Land. He is a very good man, Jeremy, though he does mend his own socks."

I was cross that she should have remembered that. I said: "He is the greatest man in the world."

"I know," Naomi said, "I wish I was ages and ages older and could marry him and mend his socks."

"Damn his socks!" I said, because I was shocked.

Naomi had clasped her freckled hands about her thin knees and was gazing out into the blue.

"That's swearing," she said. "I have heard all the swearing

there is. You are a silly boy to swear here with all the birds listening who've never heard swearing before." And there was our audience of tiny hens watching me attentively. "I only mean I love him more than anybody—more than your mother or you or anyone. My, your mother will be cross. We'd better get back."

I forgot everything else except that warning, and, grabbing her hand, I pulled her to her feet and said: "Let's run!"—because though my mother was dove quiet she wasn't one to make cross.

It was downhill all the way and we fairly skated along on the pine needles with all the little brown hens coming scurrying after us, as if we had invented a better game than ever, but as we came down to the beach they all stopped and gave up the chase. Apparently their world ended with the trees. The first person we met was Mr. Paterson, the schoolteacher. He was so glad to see us that he couldn't look as stern as he intended.

"Jeremy," he said, "your mother's in an awful state. I think you'll find her down by the schooner. She is afraid you've been eaten by cannibals, though poor, stringy eating the pair of you would have made. Be off."

My mother saw us coming, and stood there waiting. She was as happy as could be, but her face was grave.

"How naughty of you, Jeremy," she said, "to go off like that without saying a word."

"But I haven't been eaten by cannibals, mom," I pointed out cunningly. "There aren't any. Only nice little brown hens."

"That's not the point, Jeremy," said my mother.

"Mary, they're safe and sound," said Dr. Barnaby, taking a pinch of snuff.

I had never heard him call my mother Mary before, but I didn't realize that until afterwards. I felt too guilty.

My mother's sternness melted in a smile.

"I suppose it was natural—and enterprising, Matthew," she said.

So that was the doctor's first name, and she called him it but I didn't notice that either at the time.

"Youth!" said the doctor.

"Jeremy, son," she said, then anxious to be convinced, "it is a lovely island, isn't it?"

"So lovely, mom," I said, "that the little wild hens play with you."

"How grand," said my mother. "Come, son—show me."

IV

We knew the island now. Some eagerly, some lazily just stretching the legs, some in delight and some in dismay; we had explored it, if not every foot, at least enough. And what we had learnt was very much what Naomi and I had found out for ourselves on that first scramble.

There were no cannibals, there were not even Tongans living in grass huts; there were, oddly, no animals at all, but only the little brown hens and the parrots and the seabirds. There were butterflies and beetles and lizards, too, but, of course, we hadn't had any time yet to sort them out. It was about twenty-five miles from tip to tip and eighteen across so that there was acres of room. Most of it was covered with the pines but with some good grassland, and there were oyster beds on the rocks, and the sun was warm, but not too warm, and the westerly breeze blew cool across it, making the stately, friendly trees sway and sing.

It was a perfect island.

But nothing else. No people except ourselves, no lights at night except the stars or moon, nor anything at all of man since the world began except what we had brought in the *Quail*. And the sea all about, healthy and blue and smiling, but stretching away on every hand, empty and blank, to the globe's rim.

It was better than Uncle Erasmus had promised his people when he gathered them together. But I remembered what my mother had said one night to Aunt Grace long before, about being happy in heaven, for though it was grand for us kids it was different for the grown-ups. Some seemed to settle in at once—Mr. Paterson and Dr. Barnaby and the farmers and the little people who'd never cared much where they lived so long as they were sure of food. Most of the ladies

liked it, too, because they trusted my uncle and knew he would find them secure homes. But the real men, Mr. Murphy and others whom I hardly knew because they paid no attention to mere children but had stood about talking their own talk and living their own lives—I could see they were shaken. No pubs here, no street corners, no newspapers, no wages, no crowds, nothing at all of what used to be their lives. No betting, no music-halls, no boxing or football or cricket matches. Well, my uncle had warned them of all that long ago when the tug *Powerful* came alongside, but of course they hadn't realized. Even he hadn't realized, I suppose, though he had done his best for them.

I see now how much more natural and normal and easy it would have been for the meeting to have been held on the deck of the *Quail*, in daylight, my uncle addressing us as usual from the poop, but Uncle Erasmus, given guidance, and with his sense of play, was much too wise and cunning and kind for that. He gave us what we needed just then.

Farther up the stream, into which the schooner was now sinking more deeply and snugly and finally, was a point where the hillside had fallen away, leaving a sheer wall of rose pink rock from the top of which the pines looked down. At its base was a broad open space, dotted with blocks of stone and bordered on the farther side by the chuckling river. Here my uncle had had gathered together a fine collection of logs. He did it without any fuss, so that it seemed a natural business to be collecting firewood. It didn't occur even to me to be curious. It merely seemed part of shaking down. And suddenly, just as we were almost finishing dinner aboard the *Quail* on the third night, there came a bellow down the companionway—"Powder-monkey! Where's that powder-monkey?"

"Here, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I called, and leaving my rice pudding I ran up to him.

He was waiting on the poop, giving his moustache a lift up, stroking his beard. The last of the day was going, and the stars were coming out, faint and prickly, with a bit of a moon rising up over the sea.

"Boy," he said, looking down at me, "you like this island?"

"Oh, yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus. Naomi and me—we both knew it was right from the first moment we stepped ashore."

"Me, too, boy, and righter than I'd dared to hope. But now it's time to get these children of mine into residence. And it must be done prettily, boy. It must be done with colour. You know what I mean?"

"Nearly always, Uncle Erasmus, sir," I said.

"Then you'll enjoy this. And so will they. Lord Nelson and Petersen are preparing a merry bonfire along where we've been gathering the wood. In a very few moments it will be alight. Mr. Paterson down below will make the necessary announcement. Give me the time to get well away—say, while you count up to a thousand. Then, boy, here is the gong." He gave it to me. "This is a very valuable gong. It was pillaged from the Summer Palace in Peking, hence its tone. It cost me a lot of money, but should I grudge that? Boy, strike the gong once. Mr. Paterson will say his brief piece. Allow him while you count three hundred. Then beat the gong, smoothly but excitingly. Get a kind of rhythm, if you can, boy, just as you've read the natives do in your books on Africa by—by——"

He had remembered even that.

"Sir H. H. Johnston, sir, Uncle Erasmus."

"The man I meant. Give a kind of bong and a pause, and a bong and a pause. When they come pouring up, lead them from the *Quail* and across the beach and along to the appointed place. Don't feel a fool, boy. We are both mountebanks—but the Lord's mountebanks. Give the gong your heart, boy, and through its golden notes you will give them heart. March them through the evening, so that they come to me excited and uplifted. Boy, we know this is all nonsense. They are here; they cannot escape; they must make the best of it—but it is up to us, and I include you, boy—the leaders—to make these poor groundlings gay. Other people have attempted what I am attempting, new Utopias, new worlds, but they were solemn and pompous and grim and didn't know that the average age of the adult human mind is lower than your own. And I don't flatter you in saying that. Why should I flatter you, boy? Why? You are nothing."

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus."

"And yet my powder-monkey," he said, softly. "But we must give them *panem et circenses*. What does that mean, boy?"

"I don't know, sir, Uncle Erasmus."

"It's Latin, boy. It's culture. You will find it in the classical phrases section of my *Chambers's*. Wherein, alack! is all I know of the dead languages. It means 'bread and circuses' and that is their need. If I am the chief clown as well as chief baker, and you are a small inch of a clown beating a pillaged gong, what does it matter? So long as we can launch these poor paper-boats of people on a new stream of life. Now I am going, boy, and you must start your counting."

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, and watched him stride away and go over the side down the fine gangways made from the masts he had had cut down, and across the beach. He had been so friendly and funny and open with me, but, marching off there in the starlight and the ghost of the day, he looked like somebody I shouldn't have dared to speak to—a great giant, head back, beard out, big chested yet slim as a young tree beneath his gold-starred leather belt.

Away up the cleft the first tongues of flame leapt red. Yes, he had devised and timed it all, down to the last detail and second.

Of course I followed his instructions, and when I heard them stirring and buzzing below I went to the top of the gangway, and waited. It was still light enough, with the bit of moon and the first stars out and our eyes accustomed to being without street lamps. When they came tumbling up, eager to see what was afoot, I beat the gong, and that was a grand job. For, somehow, remembering what my uncle had said, and knowing the gong came from Peking, I was able to do just what he wanted. A sharp bong, a pause, two long bongs, a pause, a sharp bong, and so on, so that the whole quiet night seemed to start marching.

Down the gangway I went and up the beach beside the laughing stream, and all the people followed me as if I'd been the Pied Piper. They had linked arms and formed a procession, and boom! went the gong and bo-o-om, bo-o-om! went the gong, and I could feel them behind me, excited and keeping time, and I could hear their laughter and their chatter.

As we went on the purple deepened, but ahead was the rosy glow, warm and heartening and welcoming in the quiet of

sea and sky, and when we came round a bend into the flat space a cheer went up, for the frightening night and loneliness of Quail Island was abolished by the huge camp-fire which, roaring and spluttering, defeated the weight of darkness that had rested on the island for centuries and centuries. Even those of us who were happiest there had felt that weight at night, but now it was gone.

At the foot of the sheer pink cliff there was a big square boulder with two small boulders on top like the arms of a chair. I couldn't be sure that it had been there before, but I wouldn't have sworn it wasn't. It was either one of those things that happened for Uncle Erasmus, or one of the things he made happen. Anyway, when we came surging in, there he was sitting, enthroned in fatherly fashion, smoking his meerschaum pipe, lit by the red-gold of the blaze, at ease and above us and smilingly kind. The logs sent showers of bright sparks up into the air, and lit the cliffside and the pines above; they gilded the hurrying waters of the stream. The farmyard animals, which, apart from the poultry, my uncle had freed from their wearisome pens, had gathered about on the edges of the red cavern, glad as we were at this demonstration of the fact that Man had come into the empty world and established himself there.

I'm sure the little brown hens were discussing it all, too, but they were invisible in the shadows.

And Uncle Erasmus sat, pipe in hand, like the finest statue there could be of a great man on a pedestal in a town square.

"Be seated, please," he said. "Be at ease."

V

Just as Uncle Erasmus had designed it in his wise mind and good soul, the hour was lovely and comforting and cheery and homey. The fun and excitement of the unexpected parade had awakened and stirred up everybody, and now it was good to sit or lounge or sprawl in the warm, red house. My mother sat with one arm about Jonathan and the other about me, and Aunt Grace was next with Naomi. Familiar, friendly faces were all about. It was a big family party, and

it wasn't a boss who sat up there but Dad, kind and wise and genial on his rocky throne which was also an easy chair by the fireside. Meditative puffs of blue smoke drifted from his meerschaum as we settled down. Then there was utter quiet in the shadow of the cliff with only the silver chuckle of the stream and the crackle of the logs to emphasize the hush. The friendly, resiny smell of the burning pine scented the air.

"Citizens of Quail Island, dear children," he said, hardly raising his voice at all, so that I felt he was really talking only to me and yet at the same time knew that every single person there was soothed into the same belief, "now we know our wealth and our poverty. We have a great store of beauty and peace and health and good living, even though we may be poor in the toys and tinsel which we had to have to make the world back there endurable. We have not escaped from life, however, by entering the Promised Land. Even here we must buy this with that, lose that to gain this. I know most certainly that presently, if not just yet when we are all fresh and strange and rather startled, we shall find we have a good bargain.

"Here, where I have brought you, I can give you certain freedoms. I give you freedom from want, freedom from the fear of poverty, freedom from insecurity, freedom from ugliness, freedom to live lives as full as you can make them, freedom of thought and freedom of speech, freedom from a miserable old age, and above all freedom from the wars and tragedies to which so-called civilization is doomed for the next fifty years. This last freedom is the greatest of them all, though here on Quail Island you will never—thank God—realize it. Try, too, my dears, to remember your various worlds as they really were, and not as you may come to see them through a nostalgic mist. If your worlds had been happy I should not have brought you here. You were all unhappy. Being humans, you will forget that, and I cannot make you remember, but the fact is there. Here, on Quail Island, by a kind of almost crazy miracle—yes, I admit the crazy—you have the chance to work out your freedoms, if you will only work for yourselves. Nobody will be toiling for me, or some queer creed or to prove a mad theory. I simply say: Here is this Quail Island; here we are. We can

make what we wish of island and us. There are no strings, no catches. It is simply up to you."

He laughed suddenly, and flung one leg over the other and lounged back even more easily.

"How I preach," he said, "and yet it is only that I seem to preach. I am a prospector who found a gold mine, being given the guidance, but otherwise I am no wiser or better than any of the rest of us. Only at the moment, until we get our feet, I have to put our thoughts into words, and see that our words become deeds. For otherwise, and I am frank as ever with you, we shall perish. Yes, even in the Promised Land we must rely on ourselves and live by the sweat of our brows, but now we are serving only ourselves, we sweat only for ourselves. We are no longer part of a decaying system where the many support the few and are slaves and cannon-fodder and dupes or even desperate knaves perhaps. Now we stand, each one of us, on our own feet, under God's good sky, behind the moat of God's good sea, with all we need for a happy life if we use all we have happily, and with only ourselves to blame should we fail."

So quietly he went on.

It was all simple and good and clean. Next morning he would appoint supervisors for this task and that, and select the teams to serve under them. He knew everybody's capabilities and he mentioned names which even I, a busy and inquisitive child, could hardly attach a face to. Everything seemed easy and simple as he said it. Nobody was to be wasted on a task unsuitable. He was like a champion chess-player, knowing just what his pieces could do, having planned every move and still looking many moves ahead. We would for the moment continue to live in the schooner, but as soon as possible houses would be built, solid homes from the pines, and the pines themselves would be re-planted so that the island would always have ample timber. The land would belong to all, but each man would be placed in charge of a section which would be his particular care to be worked for his own good and the good of the community.

In the ship he had a great treasure which he had gathered together from everywhere regardless of cost, but not even he could buy a whole world and pack it in boxes and be certain that, when the boxes were opened, the world would

come alive in every detail. Tea and coffee plants, for instance. If they thrived, we should have tea and coffee; if not we should have to make do with something else—perhaps find a shrub which served a similar purpose. Sugar? He had sugar canes. If they failed there would be no sugar presently, and we should have to forget our sweet tooth. There was no other way about it. We should have wheat and potatoes and certain vegetables and certain fruits, for the island seemed kind and temperate, but if we hadn't, then that was that, also, and no appeal. We had our live stock, furred and feathered, prize beasts and birds all. With care they should flourish. If they did not then, indeed, we were in difficulties, but there were fish in the sea and man did not live by meat alone. Looking about at this rich and virgin island he had no fears.

"Your leisure?" he said. "There again it is your affair, but I have all the equipment. I have books that would take you a lifetime to read, music and the means of making it, playing cards and toys which it might have seemed silly to bring here if in the eyes of God we weren't all just little children who need such things. You will be able to play football and cricket and bowls; you will have swimming and fishing—such swimming and fishing as millionaires dream of; you will have love and marriage and children in better conditions than could ever have been yours back there. In fact, good citizens, if only you will help yourselves you can have all the health and happiness there is—if only you will help yourselves."

There would be heartbreaks, there would be blistered and calloused hands, there would be vain regrets. But we had burnt our boats. Now there was no hope anywhere save to make the best of a good job and turn Quail Island, which was already Eden, into an Eden where men and women could live.

"Make no mistake," said Uncle Erasmus, briefly stern, "I shall scotch any serpent with my heavy heel. Do not think because I love you all I am just a ninny. I have killed in my time, with bullets and bayonet and fist, in war and peace. On the other hand, please don't even begin to imagine I would rule you with fear. I am no kaiser, no czar, no sultan. Do not think I would rule you at all. Very far

from it. I make you this gift of Quail Island and your freedoms. But for purely unselfish reasons I must see to it that you don't make a mess of such lovely things. I am no better than you save that, for some odd reason, the gracious Lord nudges me now and then. When he does so I shall be stern as a Prophet in the Old Testament. Otherwise my only wish is to enjoy this lovely place with you and be happy as the day is short.

"There!—for the present I have done, and glad enough of it." He stretched his arms widely to show how glad. "Now, perhaps, we can have some music." For the first time, though it must have been in readiness from the beginning, we noticed that beside his throne was the gramophone and case of records with Mr. Paterson lounging close by. "But first there may be some questions? Remember, you are free to ask what you will, and I shall do my best to answer."

There was a pause. His talk had created a sense of comfort and security, and I think the vast majority would have been happy to start singing Mr. Lauder's choruses, leaving any worrying to wise Dad up there.

But from the back, almost in the shadow, a man shouted: "What about our drinks?"

"I gave that matter earnest thought," said Uncle Erasmus, "for I admit, I was perplexed. Drink has no place in Eden, and is not needed there. Drink is only a drug developed by man to numb him against the slings and arrows of the man-made world. There were practical difficulties, also. I was planning not for months or years, but for lifetimes. A ship ten times the size of the *Quail* couldn't have carried enough liquor to be of real use. But knowing I was dealing with ordinary humans I wished to be as kind as I could. I have brought a stock of wines which will keep, and some spirits. These will be issued on party occasions, whilst they last, and so, gradually, you will come to realize that the drinks you thought so necessary were really just foolish habits."

"That's all very well," another man called, "but what about our beer?"

And at that there was a gruff murmur of: "That's right, too. What about our beer?"

"Those practical difficulties were greatest there," said

Uncle Erasmus. "Beer doesn't keep. Had I brought any quantity, the bulk of it would have been bad long before we could have drunk it, and roomy and all as the *Quail* was I saw no reason to waste precious space on coloured water, most of which would have to be thrown away."

There was laughter to his reference to beer as coloured water—for grown-ups always laugh at jokes about the weakness of beer—and heads nodded agreement to the points he had made, but the man persisted: "You could bring plants to grow tea and coffee and sugar. Why not hops?"

"Good old hops!"

My uncle smiled.

"There, I must confess, I made a slight error of judgment. I visualized the Promised Land as a more tropical clime, and I was told that hops would be an impossible crop. Also brewing is an art."

"Faith now," called Mr. Murphy suddenly, "since we've freedom of speech, may one gentleman ask another how he's off for rum?"

Again there were laughs, but on a different note for all were curious to see how Uncle Erasmus would take such a rude question. I was shocked, and hated Mr. Murphy for daring to ask it. Uncle Erasmus slapped his knee and chuckled.

"This gentleman can inform that gentleman," he said, "that he is very well off for rum, indeed. He will add that, as the universal provider, he was entitled to provide one little extra for himself. Under the Lord's wise licence I shall continue to have my rum, though if I am spared long enough there will be an end to that, also. If anyone cannot see the justice of me, with all I have done and all I shall have to do, having one small right not granted to others, then I am afraid I have no patience with him nor any words to waste in argument. So put that in your pipe, Tim Murphy."

"No harm meant, yer honour, at all at all," said the Irishman hastily, feeling that the others were against him, "but talking of pipes, you wouldn't be doing us out of our smokes, too, yer honour?"

"Not if we are clever enough to cultivate the plants I have brought."

A cheer went up at that, and the men were happier again.

"If we do," said Aunt Grace, "it won't be much use in cigarettes. Oh dear me, Mary, life isn't gold-tipped any more."

"But it's lovely, Grace. Oh, it's lovely!" said my mother.

"They did put a nasty taste in the mouth," said Aunt Grace. "But I'll miss them—no use denying it."

"I think the wonder is they've lasted so long," said my mother. "You must have brought an awful lot."

"I did. But Erasmus is right as usual. You couldn't bring enough to last a lifetime, not even enough little scented cigarettes. Ah, yes, I shall miss them, but then I am realizing I shall miss lots of things. I wonder will Mrs. Erasmus Quail be allowed some of the rum?"

"Grace, you couldn't drink that awful stuff!"

"I might try, Mary, but aren't you overlooking the fact that I'm not your sister-in-law yet?"

The flippant way she spoke, following on Mr. Murphy's rudeness, was terrible, but I daren't say anything, though all kinds of things were on the tip of my tongue. Fortunately there was a diversion.

"Do I take it that we can now enjoy some music?" asked Uncle Erasmus.

Lord Nelson shuffled forward, feeling shy and clumsy and sorry for himself.

"Hold hard a moment, Mr. Quail, sir, first."

"You, Lord Nelson?" said my uncle, his big brows lifting a little.

"I wouldn't blame you, Mr. Quail, sir," said Lord Nelson fumbling with his hands as if he held a cap in them, "for you had to have an officer, and though I'd never been one, nor never ever wanted to be, I suppose I was the nearest you could get. So I don't blame you, Mr. Quail, sir, but it's put me in a position that's proper nasty."

"I grieve to hear that, Lord Nelson," said my uncle, really concerned, "for, indeed, whatever your modesty you are a most admirable officer."

"I thank you, Mr. Quail, sir," said Lord Nelson, touching his brow, "but see where it's landed me now, sir. It's the crew. They insist I'm the mate if not the captain. They say it was my hands that put the *Quail* ashore, sir, as it was an'

all, even though at your bidding. They say it's up to me as a kind of an officer to get them out of this. They say they're not like the rest of the people who come of their own free will to live in the Promised Land. They say they was signed on for the voyage and they want to be discharged in their home port, as set out in the Articles."

"I see," said my uncle, giving his beard a twist, "I see. Honestly, I hadn't thought of that. But it is a point, and justice must be done. Surely, Lord Nelson, owing to the hazards of the sea they are as much castaways as if they had been shipwrecked?"

"I put that to them, Mr. Quail, sir, be sure of it, but they're sea-lawyers like all sailors, sir, and they argue there never was no shipwreck, and they want their pay and their discharges at the shipping office so that they can look about for new berths."

"In squalor and discomfort to toil for a few shillings a month?"

"That's what they want, Mr. Quail, sir, seeing as how they're sailors, God help 'em."

"Strange breed," said my uncle, "but as I knew that all along I must not complain. And how do they propose to reach the shipping office?"

"They want the boat the storm spared—they say you can build canoes and the like for fishing—and they want to sail back to Australia."

"And you have told them——?"

"I told 'em, Mr. Quail, sir, that they are the barmiest lot of coots ever I clapped eyes on. I told 'em they were proper out of their senses, and that this here life would be all peaches compared with anything that was likely for them. I've talked me throat into sandpaper, Mr. Quail, sir. I told 'em they hadn't a hope in hell—begging you and the ladies' pardons—of ever getting there in an open boat without a compass, without knowing where they start from, and probably nearer the South Pole or South America than Australia if they only realized it. But they insist Australia is a big place, sir, and if they sail into the setting sun they must hit some part of it. Or with luck they might even be picked up."

"You pointed out that we have not seen a single ship since the tug?"

"I did and all, be sure o' that, Mr. Quail, sir, but they got their mule-minds fixed and nothing can shift 'em. If it's a case of picking up, I said, you might be picked up here, and nice and comfortable with your feet dry and no harm done and a lot of back pay piled up, sir, because as I ventured to say, you wouldn't need to be mean, sir, Mr. Quail."

"Correct, Lord Nelson."

"But they want their way, and there it is. You can't reason with mules or sailors." Lord Nelson, looking about to burst into tears, twirled his invisible cap harder than ever, and sucked in his cheeks and puffed out his lips through a long minute's silence. "What makes me mad, sir, Mr. Quail, is they say I got to go with them."

Uncle Erasmus frowned.

"That's preposterous, Lord Nelson. If they are insane enough to fling their lives away in such a foolhardy adventure they must be allowed to do so. I shall have no press-ganged malcontents in the Promised Land. If they wish to go they shall have a year's pay and a hundred golden sovereigns, but if you elect to remain that is only your affair and I will not have you dragged to almost certain death by a gang of imbeciles. You are a good man and needed here. If your conscience tells you to stay, then stay you must and shall."

Lord Nelson wagged his big head which was shining with sweat and emotion.

"Odd you should use that word 'conscience,' Mr. Quail, sir," he said sadly, "for that's just where the trouble comes in. If I hadn't ever been made a kind of an officer and so have to put the ship ashore it would ha' been different. But there it is, you can't escape the facts, sir. An officer I became, willy-nilly as you might say, and if they claim as an officer I must take charge of the boat, then you as a man of God and a proper gentleman will see that I haven't no choice, no matter which way I may incline. That's how it is at sea, sir."

"The dear good old man," said my mother.

"The quixotic old pet," said Aunt Grace.

"The silly old silly," said Naomi, scornfully.

CHAPTER V

I

SINCE go the sailors must, then they must go quickly. Uncle Erasmus made no bones about that. We who were busy facing a new life had little time to spare. It was lovely to see how he handled the situation. If he had done anything save what he did, others would have been anxious to go on the voyage back to the world they knew—a world which, being lost, seemed more desirable than it had ever been in reality. But Uncle Erasmus made it quite clear that the sailors were not going to any life at all, but to death, and instead of envy and unrest there was only pity for the daft, stubborn fellows.

The boat was hauled down the beach at dawn next morning, and launched. It proved to be tight and seaworthy.

"It would, laddie," sighed Lord Nelson to me. "It would. I been hopin' against hope she'd leak like a sieve. So bad that we could never get away. Ah, it's proper nasty, laddie, proper nasty."

He sucked in his cheeks and puffed out his lips and gazed with sad seal's eyes at the endless sea which stretched away into the sky.

"You shouldn't go, Mr. Lord Nelson," I said.

"They're barmy, and you're a barmy old codger to let them take you," said Naomi. "I would see them in hell first."

Though Naomi knew all the swear words, it was the first time I had ever heard her use one, which showed how badly she felt. Her fists were clenched, as if she would have liked to have beaten sense into him.

Lord Nelson laid a tattooed hand on each of our heads.

"You're good nippers," he said. "Proper nice. I thanks you. But there it is, nippers, having been made a sort of a kind of an officer after all these years—having been put, out of the goodness of Uncle Quail's heart, in the luxury of the captain's cabin, I got t' go, goddam it, beggin' your pardon. I got t' go."

Jonathan piped up suddenly.

"You're big," he said. "When you're big you don't have to do things."

"Ah, Johnny," said Lord Nelson sadly, "you'll learn yet, son, that it's when you're big you can't do as you like, and it's nastiest then."

Everybody had turned to, and by mid-afternoon the boat had been stocked with all the provisions and water she would hold. The sailors had stowed their few possessions which they carried in burst-out cheap suitcases with broken handles and in big canvas sacks.

Uncle Erasmus wouldn't let the moment pass without a little ceremony. He knew we would need them in our quiet lives.

I had beaten the gong and mustered everyone on deck.

One by one my uncle called the sailors up to the poop to collect their pile of lovely shining sovereigns and sign a receipt. Their fingers were eager on the gold, for they had never seen so much money before in all their lives, and yet their faces were unhappy. I do believe they would have liked to have changed their minds, but they were pig-headed and couldn't back out now without looking foolish. It would have seemed, too, as if they feared to make the voyage on which they had been so set. So they counted the sovereigns and tried to feel they were as good as spending them in Sydney. But that was cold comfort.

My uncle's manner was quite kind, but very grave—much as it had been when he read the funeral service. I could see the men down on the main deck saying: "Poor devils!" and things like that but ruder, and some of the women were wiping their eyes with their handkerchiefs.

When the job was done and they had stowed away their clinking fortunes in bags provided, my uncle spoke to them.

"Men," he said, "before paying off Lord Nelson I want a word with you. Where a man's conscience is concerned his rights are sacred so I have nothing further to say to him. But to you I say I do not want the good man to go to his death because he thinks it is his duty. With you it is otherwise. You have made your choice. I am prepared to buy Lord Nelson's life from you for five thousand pounds. The money is here in these sacks. Come, it's a fair offer."

There was a buzz from the main deck, but the sailors stood for a moment, mouths agape in surprise.

A small, grey man like a bedraggled mouse spoke for them.

"It's 'andsome," he said, "but we don't want more money. We wants to get to Australia. We wants 'im with us because he's the nearest we got to an officer."

Uncle Erasmus did not show the anger he must have felt.

"He is not an officer," he reasoned quietly. "He cannot navigate any better than the rest of you. He is of no more value than the next man. Five can handle the boat easily and a sixth is only another mouth to eat your rations and drink your water. Come, see the sense of all this."

But the mouse of a man shook his head.

"It may be sense, Mr. Quail," he said, "but it ain't the way we feel. With 'im we'll get there—without 'im we won't. That's the way of it, ain't it, mates?"

The others grunted endorsement.

"So, Lord Nelson," said my uncle sadly, "you are to be sacrificed on the altar of sailors' superstition. You are, it seems, the opposite of a Jonah. A pity, but I can do no more."

He handed Lord Nelson a bag of gold, which Lord Nelson did not have to count or sign for.

"No one coulda done more, Mr. Quail, sir," said Lord Nelson, "and I'll remember all me days that you offered five thousand quid for this old hulk. That's what I call proper nice, sir, ah, proper. I shan't forget that in a hurry. Nor you, sir, Mr. Quail. So now we better be off and let you get about your own affairs. I wish you, sir, Mr. Quail, and all these people here, and especially the kids, a most happy life on this proper nice little island. God bless you one and all, I say, Mr. Quail, sir, and now come on, men, let's get aboard."

His voice had grown rough and husky, he drew his brown finger across his nose, and turning sharply picked up his bag and went down from the poop and across the deck at a shambling trot, and the sailors streamed after him. Uncle Erasmus followed more slowly, stroking his beard and wrapped up in regret about old Lord Nelson, and the whole crowd of us trailed down the much-trodden beach and watched them climb into the boat.

The last man, Jim Pearce, a long, tall, fair chap with very blue eyes, the youngest of them all—was about to push her off and jump in when suddenly there was a woman's sharp cry, and Miss Jessie Hawthorne ran out of the crowd and darted down to the water's edge and flung her arms about him. She was a pretty girl in a soft kind of silly way, not like Aunt Grace. She giggled a lot and made eyes, and once I saw a man slap her on the bottom as she passed. Her mother was a small crippled widow with a family of five. Uncle Erasmus had found her through Jessie who'd been working in an hotel he stayed at. He had gathered up Mrs. Hawthorne and the whole family in his big arms and brought them along.

She wasn't silly or giggling now.

"Oh, Jim," she sobbed, "you can't go—you mustn't. Jim, I loves you! Oh, Jim, I loves you so!"

There was great excitement at that, particularly among the ladies, and my uncle's head thrust out, beak nose pointing, with his eagle look.

The sailor, Jim, straightened up, looking foolish, and tried to pick her off him, but she clung tight as a leech.

"It's no good, Jessie," he said, his face scarlet. "I've told you I like you, but I can't stay here. I'd go mad in this hole. I got to see the world. I'm a sailor. I can't put my hook down and stick in the mud. I got to keep on the move. I've told you, Jess, and told you. We had it all out, Jess."

"Then take me with you! You can't leave me behind!"

"Be sensible, Jessie. I couldn't take you. One woman in an open boat. Besides, the others wouldn't let me. Leave go o' me, Jessie. I got to go. There's your mother and the kids, too. You stay here and be happy, like I said, and in a couple of weeks you'll have forgotten all about me."

The girl was sobbing louder, and saying: "No! No! No!"

My uncle marched down, and parted them without touching either. His presence was enough.

"What is this?" he said. "Has this lad got you into trouble, Jessie? Is he running away?"

Miss Hawthorne's woe turned instantly into fury.

"How dare you say that! I don't care who you are—how dare you!"

She beat my uncle with her hands, and he stood there like a rock, making no attempt to stop her, but smiling down, so that in a moment or two she was sorry for hitting him, and stopped and stood before him with bowed head.

"Well, Jessie——?"

"Oh, Mr, Quail, what am I doing?" she said. "Only I saw red for the moment. I don't pretend to be a very good girl. I wanted him to be bad with me, but he knew he couldn't stay and so he wouldn't. Not for all my trying. Don't you see that's why he's not like other men? Don't you see that's why I love him?"

"I see that very well, Jessie," said Uncle Erasmus, gently. "And you, Jim?"

"It's no good, sir. I feel a swine, but I couldn't be happy staying here so I couldn't make her happy. It'd all go to bits. I liked her enough not to start funny tricks, and that's all I can say for meself."

"And all you need say, Jim. Man's love is as a thing apart, 'tis woman's whole existence. Go, lad, follow your restless star. This child is young and will forget you—perhaps sooner than you'll forget her. Go! Good-bye, Lord Nelson, and a happy landfall and may God send you the fortune you'll need."

He held Miss Hawthorne to him with his left arm, easily, letting her sob against his chest, and raised his right hand in dismissal and benediction. The sailor, Jim, still looking flustered and embarrassed, was glad enough to escape and to have the job of pushing the boat off and jumping in to cover his disquiet.

The boat drifted out, and now they were no longer part of the island and us. The strip of water widened and they were busy about their own concerns. The brown sail crept up and caught the breeze and filled, and the boat leaned slightly. Lord Nelson, face set like a mask of brown wood, sat in the stern, his arm resting on the tiller. Just once he waved his right hand with the blue dragons crawling on it, but he looked only at the sail.

The stern of the boat showed now, and she stole slowly away from us and Quail Island into the unknown, carving a fan of ripples on the ruffled water.

We stood there quietly, watching, and we were sorry for

them and for Miss Hawthorne and her boy, Jim, but most of all for Lord Nelson, who had known what a good place Quail Island was but had gone because he thought it was his duty.

If anybody but Uncle Erasmus had been in charge there would have been people swimming after that boat whose bow pointed back to the world.

But he was in charge, so even the men who missed their pubs and race-courses were content enough to remain on the beach because they knew that those others were off on a fool's errand.

The excitements of the day weren't over yet, however.

The musing hush was broken again by a woman's cry, and this time it was even more painful than before. I was a child then and had never heard such a sound. It came from Mrs. Solomon, the tailor's wife, and it threw the ladies into a storm of excitement. The men swore beneath their breaths, and we children were all agog, for, although it was supposed to be a secret, we knew that Mrs. Solomon, the tailor's wife, was going to have another baby. She was a very little woman with a pale face, but she had been getting fatter every day, and all the ladies used to fuss and whisper over her. Mr. Solomon, the tailor, was small too, with blue jaws and a sad look and a hooked nose from which his face receded. His eyes were brown and moist. They had four children already, and the youngest had had its first birthday aboard the *Quail*—with a cake with one candle on it and all—just after we sailed.

Dr. Barnaby snapped his snuff-box closed and took charge.

He rapped out orders, and the men picked her up and carried her back to the schooner as fast as they could go, as if terrified that she would have her baby before they could get her there and cover them with confusion.

And all the women were in a fuss, like the tiny brown hens, and they ran along as the hens had run after Naomi and me, and they chattered in the same way, saying: "The poor creature!" and "It would be nice if it's a boy after the little girl!" and things like that, gayer and more lively than I had seen them since the Melbourne Cup.

And Mrs. Solomon, the tailor's wife, wowwowed and groaned most awfully.

Uncle Erasmus took a last look at Lord Nelson in the boat, but he was only a blob of black now and not the man we had known. It was queer to think that already they were so cut-off that they didn't know about the baby that was coming.

"Boy," said my uncle, "what's afoot?"

"Mrs. Solomon, the tailor's wife, is going to have her baby, sir, Uncle Erasmus."

"Correct, boy. I'm glad you didn't try to assume coy ignorance. Never be coy, boy; never be ignorant if you can avoid it. Need I draw your attention again, boy, to the mysterious way in which the Lord moves to perform his wonders? There go men fleeing the Promised Land, and here comes a man to take their place. Man born of woman!"

"It might be a little girl, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, which was rather silly, but I was a bit excited.

"It will be a man child," said my uncle. He looked up into the sky which was flushing with the setting of the sun. "We thank thee, O Lord, for this sign," he said.

Looking back from the *Quail* as we climbed aboard I saw the little boat with its brown wing flitting away like a lonely moth. Only Miss Hawthorne remained on the beach, standing by the water's edge, watching.

The gulls were beating above as ever, and the men were smoking and talking uneasily. With the going down of the sun the breeze dropped a little, and the night was very quiet, save for the noises of Mrs. Solomon, the tailor's wife, which though muffled kept everyone on edge and listening.

"Never no babies for me," said Naomi, brows drawn together in a frown. "Mothers are bad, and it's bad to be a mother."

I had to laugh. A scraggy little bit of a girl talking about having babies!

"You wouldn't laugh if you were having the baby," said Naomi, and all at once her little threepenny-bit face looked ages old and full of pain.

II

We had worked very hard all the week, from earliest grey gleam of dawn to the shutting down of the dark, and sometimes even after that by the light of the waxing moon. The weather had remained hot and still without a single breath of breeze, and the men and boys had gone about their tasks stripped to the waist and feeling sorry for the ladies in their long skirts and blouses with puffy sleeves.

Quail Island, quiet since time began save for its own noises of bird and tree and sea, was noisy now with the sound of axes, the crash of falling pines, the shouts in unison of men hauling logs or lifting weights together, the rasp of saws, the beat of hammers and the yelling of orders and questions.

The little hens thought it was great fun at first, but they got trampled on and hurt, so they withdrew from under our feet and went back into the quieter glades where they watched and gossiped about these great, strange happenings. The parrots flashed in rainbow flocks, chattering and shrieking, and above against the still blue there was always the snow-storm of the seabirds. Cicadas and grasshoppers and crickets shrilled incessantly through the long, hot hours, and big square-nosed lizards stared with jewel eyes from the hot pink rocks.

My uncle had decreed that the housing of the live stock must be our first consideration, and we were building pens and yards and houses for the hens and ducks and turkeys, sties for the pigs and cowsheds. The bull and his four cows, and the ram and his sheep were allowed to wander during the day, but they were brought in at night, for Uncle Erasmus knew we had to do things right from the start and he had no intention of allowing the beasts to run wild and come to harm themselves or damage our crops later on. He would not allow any slovenly or makeshift work either, for, he said, we were building not just for to-day but for our children's children.

Our labours went well. Everybody was glad to be so busy after the long inactivity aboard the *Quail*, and the

general bustle made the hardest task a game. Uncle Erasmus seemed to have multiplied himself six times over, for he was everywhere, supervising, helping, ordering, cracking jokes, and wherever he was he was the strongest and gayest and cleverest man, so that even those who had been drones back in the world became workers now and heeded his warning that we must turn the island into our happy and prosperous and orderly hive, or perish.

Once he had talked poetry about a land where it was always afternoon, and lotus-eaters. There was no time to remember that now, but if he made us sweat he sweated thrice as much himself, and his spirit ran through everyone, making the weak strong and the lazy energetic. Even a man like Mr. Paterson, who was a schoolteacher with a killing cough, worked with his hands like a navvy and prospered on it.

But Sunday had come, the day of rest, a hush, a pause, a holiday for tired muscles and blistered hands.

In the morning Uncle Erasmus held a short service. We didn't have to attend, but everyone did because it was a sociable, civilized kind of thing, and we didn't want to become a lot of savages. Then there was swimming, and, as we were not a lot of savages, as Uncle Erasmus said, the ladies and girls swam from our beach and the men and boys went round the headland to the next bay where we swam with nothing on, just like in the baths at home. The water was lovely, clear and cool and green, and we dived from rocks and sun-bathed on the hot sands.

"Faith, I haven't an ache left in the whole of me aching body," said Mr. Murphy, and we all felt like that.

Then we strolled back through the pines, and the ladies had made a good Sunday dinner which we ate in leisurely fashion, knowing there was no work to do later beyond clearing up.

Now it was afternoon, and we lazed about on deck. Uncle Erasmus had issued tobacco and the men were happy. Some slept with their mouths open, snoring. Others played cards. The ladies gossiped and sewed and darned. Naomi, Jonathan and Davy Hawthorne and I played snakes-and-ladders in what had been the bows, for you could hardly call them the bows any more. The *Quail* was becoming less and less a ship and more and more a house. The sand was creeping up the walls

which had been her sides, and soon it would only be a bit of a jump down to the beach.

"Did the ladies swim with nothing on, Naomi?" I asked, for we had been wondering about that.

"Only the girls," said Naomi. "Some of the grown-ups had proper costumes like your mother and your Aunt Grace, but some had to go in in their vests and bloomers. We had to laugh, they looked so funny, 'specially when they got wet. I wish I was like your Aunt Grace, though she's bold and brazen."

That made me angry.

"My Aunt Grace isn't bold and brazen. She's lovely."

"Yes, but some of them said she was bold and brazen just the same."

"Who said that?"

"Never mind," said Naomi. "You'd try and get back at them, and you can't because they're grown-ups. I know all about you, Jeremy. More than you do yourself. Your Aunt Grace is your best girl. You're only a silly boy. Boys know nothing."

Davy was sniggering, and Jonathan was clapping his hands and saying: "Best girl! Best girl! Jeremy's best girl!"

I could feel my face burning redder and hotter under the hot red burn of the sun, and I wanted to say or do something which would make Naomi shrivel up like a snail when you drop salt on it.

"You're the silly fool," was all I found to say. "Silly fool! Aunt Grace is nearly as old as my mother. You talk like a silly fool." It wasn't at all as I'd intended, but the right words wouldn't come.

"Ha, ha, silly fool," said Jonathan, but he wasn't talking about Naomi. I gave him a push—I couldn't help myself—and he fell over and bumped his head against the anchor and made it worse for me, because, though he'd hurt himself he wouldn't cry, but just glowered.

"All the same," said Naomi, "I know. Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me—so there! And in spite of all you say, you'd have liked to have seen your Aunt Grace when she was brazen and bold." She sat there, grinning at me so that all her freckles teased and danced.

"Silly fool," I said, but it was no good. "Why?" I had to ask.

"I don't have to tell."

"Please."

"All right, Jeremy," she said graciously. "I will, since you ask me so nicely. Mrs. Goddard wouldn't go in because she didn't have a proper costume, and your Aunt Grace said it was all a lot of stuffy nonsense, and she took her own costume off, right in front of everyone, and gave it to Mrs. Goddard. And a lot of them said 'Ooo!' because they were shocked, but your Aunt Grace just laughed and said: 'This is the latest fashion. You'll all be wearing it for the beach in a week or so.' I clapped because she looked so pretty and white and laughing with her black hair tumbling down. Just like a statue. Only statues don't skip and laugh. Your best girl's as nice as a statue and I love her, too, so you needn't be cross, because she wasn't bold and brazen at all. I only said what they said to make you hoppin' mad."

"Here, what about another game," said Davy, who didn't care anything about my Aunt Grace. I was glad enough of his suggestion, for I knew Naomi was watching me thinking about Aunt Grace there in the sunshine on the golden sand.

But, before we could start, Naomi was off again on another line. She was in one of her moods when, as my mother said, she was as mischievous as a monkey.

"Your sister's a witch, Davy," she said.

"Davy's sister a bitch!" said Jonathan.

Naomi was shocked.

"That's swearing, Jonathan," she said. "I'd slap you for swearing at your age if you hadn't just bumped your head. I said Davy's sister was a witch—and that's not swearing."

"How d'y'mean?" asked Davy, rattling the dice impatiently, for he cared no more about his sister than about Aunt Grace.

Naomi was disappointed not to get a bite.

"She is, all the same," she went on. "Look at her there doing her witching. It's your sister, Jessie, that won't let the boat get away."

"Golly, Naomi," I said, "I never thought of that."

A sort of cold prickle ran over my hot skin, for I had read a lot about witchcraft in Sir H. H. Johnston's books on Africa,

and perhaps you could do it without being a native in a leopard's skin.

I looked at Miss Hawthorne and there she was, sitting on the rail with her feet dangling over the side and her back turned on the island and its people. She sat there like that every moment she wasn't working, and sometimes when she should have been working. And she just gazed and gazed out across the hot blue sea at the boat, with her weak but pretty face hungry and sad. And Darkie, one of the ship's cats, sat on the broad rail beside her, close and friendly, and staring, too, as if he saw a mouse.

And there after more than a week—eight long days and eight long nights—the boat was still in sight, her brown sail like a moth. As she drifted she was sometimes a little nearer, and sometimes a little farther off, but she never went out of sight. It was as if she were hooked to Quail Island by an invisible wire.

It had been a joke at first and the cause of much laughter, particularly among the men who might have wanted to go but didn't because of my uncle's cunning. Now, however, it wasn't a joke. We remembered our calm in the comfortable *Quail*. They would be being broiled alive, and even if a breeze came they would have made a big hole in their food and water whilst they were getting nowhere. Uncle Erasmus had told them flatly that they were going to their deaths, but now it began to seem as if they might perish within sight of the Promised Land, while we could do nothing for them nor could they do anything for themselves for there were no oars in the big heavy boat—they had been washed away in the storm—and she was stuck there in the blue like the fly in the piece of amber Uncle Erasmus had for a paperweight on the table in his cabin.

He had led us that morning in prayer for our brothers, beset by the Pacific. But for once even a prayer from Uncle Erasmus had gone unanswered.

"Do you really think so?" I asked Naomi.

"Of course," she said. "You don't have to be clever to be a witch. It's a gift that's in you. That's why she has a black cat. You look at Darkie with her always like that. Jessie Hawthorne's a witch. But witching won't do her any good. Even a witch can't hold a man who wants to get

away. What we ought to do is burn her for the sake of dear old Lord Nelson and the rest of them."

"We couldn't burn Miss Hawthorne," I said, appalled.

"I don't see why not," said Naomi, calmly. "She doing six murders."

"Come on, come on, what about another game," said Jessie's brother, Davy, as if we'd been gossiping about something of no interest to him.

III

The sound of the gong startled me. Supposing Uncle Erasmus had been shouting for his powder-monkey? I jumped up and ran, upsetting the snakes-and-ladders board, which was a pity, for I was almost out, and whoever won the most games out of a hundred was to have one of Naomi's sovereigns. If Naomi won she was to keep the prize.

As I scurried along what used to be the deck but was now just a floor, all the people were bestirring themselves and moving aft—all except Miss Hawthorne who still sat on the rail, heedless of us. But when I got to the poop everything was all right. My uncle was beaming and cheerful and smelt of rum. Of course he had his stage carefully set.

At the break of the poop was a table draped with a Union Jack on which stood one of the huge white clam shells we found on the rocks. It was full of sea-water. The tailor and the tailor's wife sat in chairs of honour at either side. Mrs. Solomon looked paler than usual, and it was queer to see her body thin again. Mr. Solomon seemed all nose and shining eyes. They were both very proud and rather awed and bewildered. They weren't used to having a fuss made over them.

Whilst we gathered together my uncle played "When Mothers of Salem" on his banjo. He didn't play it very well, and it was odd to play a hymn on a banjo, but though he was obviously enjoying himself he managed to be so reverent at the same time that nobody wanted to laugh. As ever he held us like puppets on strings and we danced as he wished and were the better for it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, children," he said, when he had jangled out the last chord, "we celebrate the happiest, most important and most significant event that has happened as yet on Quail Island. In truth, I might say the most important event that will ever happen here." At these words Mr. and Mrs. Solomon looked so proud that I thought they were going to cry. "Though, of course, it will happen again and again to others, and the more often the better. We are here, dear people, to name the twins of the good Mr. and Mrs. Solomon."

He bowed to the parents and started a round of applause himself by clapping, and though it might have seemed queer to clap in church we all joined in and it was fun. Mr. and Mrs. Solomon didn't know what to do, but sat there bobbing their heads in thanks and the tailor's wife wiped her eyes and the tailor blew his big nose.

Uncle Erasmus made a sign, and my mother and Aunt Grace, both dressed in their very best, appeared from the companionway, each looking radiant and beautiful after her own fashion. My mother carried one of the twins wrapped in a white shawl, and Aunt Grace the other. All the ladies cooed like a lot of doves, and there was more clapping. My mother and Aunt Grace stood on each side of Uncle Erasmus, dwarfed into happy little girls by his bigness.

Uncle Erasmus turned to my mother and held out his huge hands. My mother took the little boy baby out of the shawl. It was a funny shrimp of a thing with lank black hair and huge black eyes and little tightly clenched fists and bent legs, but even if it wasn't very beautiful it was a very young baby, so all the ladies cooed louder than ever and even the grumpiest men grinned and wagged their heads in amusement. The baby had no clothes on at all, but that didn't matter in the hot sunshine and the still, warm air. My mother laid the tailor's son in my uncle's hands as if they were a cradle, and the baby seemed no bigger than a doll.

"Your mamma and your pappa," said Uncle Erasmus, gravely addressing the infant, "paid me the high honour of wishing to name you 'Erasmus.' The idea was attractive and I toyed with it, but with guidance I have found an even better name for you, my boy." The baby reached up its

bit of a hand and caught my uncle's beard and tugged it. Everybody laughed. "The strength of the young man!" said my uncle. "Why, he's a pocket Sandow!" The tailor and his wife looked as if they were really going to burst with pride. "There are no creeds on Quail Island, neither Gentiles nor Jews nor Pagans. We worship the one God who is the same by every name men give Him. To the glory of God and in humble recognition of His fatherly kindness in bringing us to this earthly paradise, I name you, first born citizen of Quail Island, with this water from God's good moat, the sea, I name you——" He paused a moment, raising the baby above the fluted shell, and keeping us all guessing about the name he had chosen—"I name you Adam. Welcome to Eden, Adam Solomon."

My uncle lowered the baby gently into the water, and it let go his beard and yelled at the top of its lungs. We were all laughing and cheering and clapping, and everyone was delighted with the name he had chosen. Then he held Adam Solomon up for us all to see, his big hands very gentle, and Adam, feeling the sun's warmth, forgot his tears and crowed as if mightily pleased with himself and his part in the big occasion.

And all the ladies said "The lamb!" and things like that, and the men said: "Cute nipper! Never think old Solly had it in him!"

Uncle Erasmus handed Adam back to my mother who had a towel in the shawl and dried him and made him snug. Then my uncle took Adam's sister and he called her Eve. She didn't cry at all, but her dark eyes gazed at us, round and huge and sad and wise.

"Adam and Eve Solomon," said Uncle Erasmus then, "I shall be your godfather and these ladies your godmothers. You may if you wish call your God by the names your fathers gave Him and worship Him in their ways. That's entirely up to you and your Pappa and Mamma. Our only task will be to see that you grow to be a good boy and a good girl, and a good man and a good woman. May you thrive happily here, and may you in turn have babies that the tribe of Solomon shall ever be worthy citizens of Quail Island. We are now going to drink your health in some of the precious beer, which is already sour and flat, and there'll be tea and

cakes and music. A proper party in your honour, Adam and Eve. I think you did well to join us here."

So we gave three cheers for Adam and Eve and everyone was gay, but Mr. Solomon, the tailor, and his wife were the happiest people in the whole world and knew that for them Quail Island was, indeed, the Promised Land.

IV

Naomi still called my uncle, Mr. Uncle. Of course, she knew now that wasn't his proper name, but I think it gave her a feeling that she belonged to him in a special way and that he really was a proper relation of hers, so that she wasn't all alone. She was a favourite of his. Once he sat her on his lap and for a whole half-hour told her a story which made all her freckles hop and kept her toes wriggling in delight, but what the story was she would never tell anyone, not even me. She said it was her private story which he had given her so that she would have something of her very own to keep. If it had been anybody else I should have been jealous, I'm sure, but I couldn't be jealous of Naomi. She was such a funny little girl who'd come to us in a frock made from a sugar sack, and had had an awful mother.

"My uncle's friend God made me do it," said Naomi.

It was nearly a month after the baptism, and the poor boat was still out there on the burning sea, tied to Quail Island by the invisible wire. Seeing her like that, thinking of Lord Nelson and the others, was terrible. Whenever we were happy we would suddenly catch sight of her, and then we would be sad. Yet there was nothing we could do. They had long since taken down the sail, to use it as a kind of tent we supposed, and the boat was just a small black speck in the blue. No doubt it seemed to them that no wind would ever blow again.

And all the time Miss Jessie Hawthorne sat on the rail every moment she could spare, and stared out and went on with what Naomi called her witching.

I was the only soul—apart from Darkie—who saw Naomi creep up behind her that evening and give her a sudden push.

I don't think she had intended to hurt her really. I think Miss Hawthorne sitting there with Darkie had got on Naomi's nerves so that she felt she just had to do something to try to break the spell. It wasn't really far to fall, with the sand creeping up. She shouldn't have hurt herself at all.

But Miss Hawthorne was a soft silly kind of girl, and she fell awkwardly. She broke her leg and made a noise almost as bad as Mrs. Solomon had. Darkie gave a startled wow and fled up the beach. We were frightened and got help quickly. Miss Hawthorne was carried below. She had been so lost in her thoughts, or whatever she was doing, that she didn't even realize she had been pushed but believed she had just fallen of her own accord.

We talked it over in the hush of the dusk. Naomi said she wasn't afraid or ashamed of what she had done because Mr. Uncle's God had made her, for the sake of Lord Nelson and the men, but I knew there would be terrible trouble if the truth came out. Perhaps even Uncle Erasmus wouldn't understand. It was as difficult as that to explain, yet it seemed to me that Naomi shouldn't be punished for doing what she thought was right. When I told her all this her eyes shone when they looked at me, not just with gratitude, but strangely, and suddenly she put her head against me and cried. They were tears of happiness, I could tell, and so I was happy, too, that I had been able to save little Naomi from disgrace. I had never seen her cry before. She was too much like a boy.

Just at that moment, before they'd even got Miss Hawthorne properly to bed, a breeze came!

We couldn't believe it; it was frightening and strange and wonderful. It grew from light puffs, which just chipped the purple mirror of the sea, into a healthy, steady wind. We stared at each other, and our faces looked white, like the faces of ghosts, in the fading light.

"Golly," I said, "you've saved Lord Nelson, and she was witching."

"I knew it! I knew it!" cried Naomi, and went dancing jubilantly round the deck, because it wouldn't have been nice to have broken Miss Hawthorne's leg for nothing, but what did a broken leg matter now?

We scampered below with the good news, and everyone was

delighted, and hurried on deck to confirm it and make sure the wind had not dropped. I knocked on my uncle's door, and went in. He was sitting reading Shakespeare and puffing his big pipe. I told him what had happened and he smiled, keeping finger on place.

"Mark this, boy," he said. "Here it is written, at this very line: 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.'"

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I answered, though I didn't quite see what he meant.

"Thank you, boy. You may go. But remember the words of the Bard."

I promised I would.

Above everybody was sniffing the breeze and feeling it blow through their hair and on their skin, and saying it might last for a month and hoping it would. For Lord Nelson and those men out there had been haunting us, and it was good to think they would do so no more. Naomi was still hopping with secret glee because she had broken the spell by breaking the witch's leg. I was glad that I had more than half-believed her, and she couldn't brag now that she had told me so.

My mother came on deck presently.

"She's much easier," she told Mr. Paterson and a group of men. "Dr. Barnaby has set the limb. He says it's a clean break, and should mend well." Naomi and I, despite what we knew, were relieved to hear that. "The poor creature stood it very well, particularly when she heard the calm had ended. She's certain he'll come back to her now. She says she knew she could bring him back, and that he couldn't ever sail away like that."

Naomi gave me a nudge.

"If it's any comfort to the pore soul, let her hug it to her bosom," said Mr. Murphy. "We might even keep up the pretence whilst she begins to mend. But faith! 'tis now her sailor-lad will be showing her a clean pair of heels, or me name's not Tim Murphy."

Naomi piped up suddenly.

"I hope he does! I hope he does! It'll be bad if she pulls him back. He shouldn't let her witch him back."

My mother was shocked.

"You mustn't say such things, Naomi!" She spoke sharply for her.

"But it's true, I know."

"Such nonsense!" said my mother. "At your age! Anyway, it's time you children were abed. You're getting out of hand, and that won't do. We're not a lot of savages. Where's Jonathan?"

We found him sound asleep on the hatch, curled up with the black cat, Darkie, in his arms, and my mother shooed us all down to the rooms which had once been cabins.

V

As it was a working day we were up, of course, in the grey of dawn and the first thing everybody looked for was something they hoped wouldn't be there—the moth of a boat. At first it was too dark to see, but gradually east and west glowed with scarlet and the crinkled clouds the wind had brought turned to purple and rose and the dancing waves were tipped with gold.

"Look! Look!"

A hubbub rose and every finger pointed.

All through the night the wind had blown steadily from the north-east, and we knew it should have carried the boat beyond the horizon, but she was still there and even bigger than before. Then as the sun climbed up over the shoulder of the globe and flooded sea and sky with light we saw that she was not heading away towards Australia, but back to Quail Island. This increased the excitement, and it was generally agreed that they were returning to replenish food and water.

"Anyway, we'll see old Lord Nelson again," I said.

"Yes, there's that good," Naomi said, "but I should have broken Miss Hawthorne's leg sooner. She's won. I left it too long."

Darkie, the black cat, walked past her, tail in the air, proud as Punch. Naomi would have liked to kick him; but she didn't, and not only because grown-ups don't approve of little girls who are cruel to animals. She was scared to kick

Miss Hawthorne's friend who had shared in the witching. I'd never seen Naomi scared before, not even of Uncle Erasmus.

My uncle was as wise as ever. Though he worked us so hard as a general thing, he knew when to be lenient. Apart from milking the cows and the tasks like that which had to be done, he allowed us to potter about the house and the beach, pretending to be busy. And his people noticed the fact and spoke of it. Those were the things for which we loved him.

The boat grew and grew, tacking this way and that, beating back to the island as though towed on an invisible wire against the wind that would have taken it away. It leaned over, seeming to struggle to get free, but of course it couldn't. The waves slapped over it, sending up showers of shining spray. We gathered at the water's edge, and it came in reluctantly, following the path the *Quail* had taken once. Some of the men waded out through the foaming shallows, grabbed the gunwales and ran her up on the beach high and dry into our midst while we stood awed and silent and staring.

The boat's crew had left us as white men. They came back bearded blackfellows who didn't seem to know where they were. We could barely recognize them; we hardly expected them to understand English. They sprawled about in the boat, dazed, their bodies like skeletons, though they must have had plenty to eat and drink. Only Lord Nelson sat upright. He was still at his place in the stern, leaning on the tiller, a sort of a kind of an officer. The sun had blacked out the blue dragons on his hands. His round face seemed to have dropped in like a collapsing toy-balloon and a grizzled stubble fringed his face from ear to ear in a beard that looked as if it could be unhooked. But his seal's eyes glowed with a queer kind of happiness which made me want to cry.

Uncle Erasmus stepped forward, big arms held out in welcome, blue eyes, that could be so hard and bright, wonderfully soft.

"Mr. Quail, sir!" said Lord Nelson, and raised the finger of his left hand towards his brow in that gesture of his.

"Mr. Mate, Lord Nelson," said my uncle gruffly.

"Proper nasty," said Lord Nelson, speaking with difficulty as if he hadn't used words for a long time. "Got to report, sir, the men have changed their minds and ask permission to

continue with you on Quail Island, sir, for good and all. Scuttle the ruddy boat they say, sir, Mr. Quail, beggin' your pardon. The money's all here, and they wants you to take it back. They've had what you might call a sharp lesson, Mr. Quail sir. A lot o' nonsense has been knocked out of 'em. No more trouble, Mr. Quail, sir. Ah, it's proper nice to be home."

It was a lot to say after being out there so long in the blue quiet. He slipped down on the tiller, feeling that the job was done. Uncle Erasmus bent down and picked him up as if he had been a baby, and marched away with him up the beach. He would be gentle and kind tucking Lord Nelson down in the captain's cabin which had cost the poor man so dear.

Then everybody began to help the sailors. They weren't dying. It was only that they had been cooped up for such ages that every bit of them, their bodies and legs and arms, all their muscles, were weak and slack.

"Where's Jessie?" Jim asked.

They didn't want to bother him just then.

"She's waiting for you in the *Quail*," Mr. Paterson said.

"She had a bit of a fall, but she's waiting for you."

"She's waiting for you all right," said Naomi, scowling, but I was the only one who paid any heed to her.

And I thought she was silly to be cross still, for, witching or not, it was very nice to have them all back again, especially Lord Nelson.

VI

Day in, day out, the axes flashed, the saws shrilled, spades and picks turned the earth, and the taming of Quail Island went on.

The sailors made a quick recovery, and the extra six pairs of hands were useful, particularly as they were very willing hands which seemed anxious to do penance for their owners' folly in choosing the cruel sea before the kind and gentle island. Lord Nelson was soon able to suck in his chubby cheeks again, and he was almost as ubiquitous as Uncle Erasmus, doing a thousand tasks and a likely man at all of them.

"Ah, Mr. Quail, sir," he would say, gleefully, rubbing his

hands where the dragons crawled again, "me—I'm happy as a sandboy, whatever that may be. To quote your own words, I have reached the haven where I would be. And that's what I call proper nice."

We used the boat for fishing now, and reaped a rich harvest from those virgin waters, but Lord Nelson would never put his foot aboard her. The sea was nasty; he had done with it finally and forever.

Autumn drifted into winter, but though the air turned colder and the nights had a nip in them and we stopped our swimming, the season was not harsh. With the trees and most of the scrub evergreen the change mattered even less. The gales which set the pines and breakers roaring were followed by days of bright clear sunshine; the rain storms which beat in across the ocean washed the island and fed the earth. We were very healthy, braced after the softness of summer. Even Mr. Paterson's cough, which troubled him less and less, did not come back.

The only things that suffered by our coming were the little brown hens. That was a pity, for they were our first friends. The rats from the ship, which had tried to eat Naomi's chocolate biscuits, scampered ashore and soon became a pest. They killed the little hens and ate their eggs. So did the cats, which from four had increased to scores. But we could not kill off the cats because they kept down the rats. The little hens were out of luck in every way. There were an awful lot of them, however, so though they became timid and afraid, and lived no longer in the age of innocence, they continued their fight for survival in their quieter places.

As the log houses were completed the schooner became more and more a place where we kept our stores, though those whose homes were not ready still slept aboard and ate there. You could step from her rail to the beach. In fact, we had to shovel the sand from the decks.

Miss Hawthorne married her Jim Pearce. Uncle Erasmus made it a gala day, but though he seemed surprised at the request, he let Naomi, Jonathan and I go for a picnic. It wasn't often anything we did surprised him, but, of course, I couldn't explain, and as I asked it as a favour he gave permission, wrinkling his brows, blue eyes quizzing us as if he could almost read what was in our minds.

But surely even Uncle Erasmus could not do that?

Naomi didn't want to stay because she hated the thought of any wedding, and would have died rather than go to a witch's, and I didn't want to stay because I knew about the witching, and, though it had brought Lord Nelson and the rest back, witching was dangerous, and I couldn't like Miss Hawthorne, somehow. She was pretty after her fashion, but she was silly and soft and messy, too, in a way I couldn't define, and I knew, though again without real reason, that she shouldn't have got Jim Pearce. Also Naomi would have been sad on a picnic by herself, yet if she stayed she would have blurted out all about the witching and then there would have been trouble.

Jonathan came along because he liked picnics best, anyway.

When we got back at sunset my mother said we were geese to miss the party, but we knew better, and Davy Hawthorne told us his sister had nearly made him sick, kissing everyone and giggling and crying, and raising such a fuss, as if nobody had ever got hitched up to a man before.

Soon afterwards Job Martin, the shoemaker, died, and he was the first man to die on Quail Island since the world began.

He was a little old bent fellow with a face like a bit of his own leather and a frizz of white hair. He was a widower with one grown son, and they had kept a little shop in the bush somewhere. In the years before Uncle Erasmus had found the Daybreak reef, Job Martin had often repaired my uncle's boots for nothing. He was heavy on boots, tramping all Australia looking for his gold. Job Martin did a lot of work like that for nothing, so he never made much money. But Uncle Erasmus did not forget him and lifted him and his boy out of the little iron-roofed shanty of a shop.

My uncle was sad that the worthy Job Martin had not lived longer to enjoy the Promised Land, but on the practical side it did not matter so much, because Tim Martin, the shoemaker's son, had learnt the trade.

Petersen, the Swede, made a proper coffin.

Uncle Erasmus had God's Acre cleared and fenced on a lovely hillside, looking out towards the setting sun. Masses of little white flowers carpeted the ground when the pine-needles were shovelled away, and we buried little old Job

Martin there under a cross cut from the soft rock of the island, and the pines harped their hymns over the quiet plot.

"Presently, my children," said Uncle Erasmus, when he had finished the service, "we shall all sleep here. That is a strange thought, but one which needn't worry us because there is no escape, and we shall sleep sound. Now the three great things of human life have come to Quail Island—birth and marriage and death. The wheel turns. To-day, I would remind you, Maria, the sow, had her litter, and Isabel, her calf. So we go on, my children, and another dawn follows each sunset."

It was strange to talk about piglets and calves at a funeral, but very like Uncle Erasmus and we knew what he meant.

We gave Job Martin a cheerful send-off at his wake that night, with whisky for the men and a ration from such other luxuries as remained for the rest of us. We sang "For he was a Jolly Good Fellow," which seemed a little out of keeping, and yet on future occasions of the same kind, we always did so. It became a custom.

"Boy," said Uncle Erasmus, "even when Death comes the quick must be happy and able to thumb their noses at the grim fellow and scoff, O Death where is thy sting?"

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BOOK THREE
THE ISLAND—1918

CHAPTER VI

I

A WARM and gentle breath of high summer stole in through the open window, and I stood there feeling all hands and feet and clumsiness.

My mother lay in the big bed which Uncle Erasmus had bought five years ago in Sydney with sovereigns from his battered leather bag. He had always been fond of my mother, and he had wanted her to have a little extra luxury. He might have thought, being thoughtful Uncle Erasmus, that a widow lady would sleep lonely in such a big double bed, but perhaps, being wise Uncle Erasmus, he had known she wouldn't.

She still looked a little pale and tired, but happiness shone out of her like golden light.

In the curve of her arm, held very tenderly, was that which I had never expected to have—my baby sister.

No wonder I felt gawky and tongue-tied, and not at all the fine grown-up man who read Shakespeare and everything and was the best swimmer and axeman on Quail Island. Standing there, I thought back to Adam and Eve Solomon. How proud the tailor and his wife had been, but the twins were nothing by comparison with this sister of mine. She was the loveliest baby I had ever seen; not wrinkled and old as most of them are when they're really new, but with the skin of a rose-bud and huge blue eyes and a smiling mouth and a look about her altogether as if she loved me and the world and everything in it.

"Golly, mom," I gasped as if I were a bit of a kid again, "what a peach!"

Tears of pride filled my mother's gentle eyes.

"A cherub straight from heaven, Jeremy," she said in her dove's voice. "We shall call her Ruth, though I hope there will never be alien corn for her. But Ruth is a lovely name. Then we shall have Ruth and Naomi on Quail Island."

I was surprised at her thinking of Naomi just then, and she had blinked her happy tears away and was watching me with an odd look.

"Why, yes," I said, "that's a grand name for her. Ruth! I like that. And though Naomi doesn't care much for babies she will be as pleased as anything. She loves you a lot, mom, in her own way. Almost as if you were her real mother. Well, not like that, because she hated her, but you know what I mean. And little Ruth will be a baby sister to Naomi."

"Exactly—a sister!" my mother smiled.

"What does Aunt Grace think of her?"

"Aunt Grace was here when she drew her first breath, and she fell in love with her that moment—even before she'd washed her."

"I do believe," I decided, studying Ruth, "she's going to be even prettier than Aunt Grace."

"You and your Aunt Grace!" laughed my mother, and sent me away then because she wanted to rest.

In the outside room Dad Barnaby was waiting. Mr. Solomon had made his new suit for the occasion, but somehow it contrived to look different from the ordinary run of Mr. Solomon's suits—a professional suit. There was no track of snuff on the waistcoat. The snuff had run out long ago. He looked about twenty years old, and his beaming face and appearance of floating in the air rather than just standing on the ground would have won a smile from a man on his way to be hanged.

"Dad," I said, for, though he had offered me the choice of calling him by his Christian name when he married my mother, I much preferred to think of him as Dad, "you look like a cat that's swallowed a whole aviary of canaries."

Dad Barnaby rubbed his hands jubilantly and chuckled.

"I feel like that, Jeremy, I feel just like that," he said. "Yes, I think your mother and I have done quite a nice job of work. I mean, of course, for a couple of old people."

"Old people!" I said. "You're younger than I am. And Ruth's the peachiest peach. Thanks, Dad, for Ruth."

"Thank God for Ruth," said Dad Barnaby, and though he wasn't by any means a religious man like Uncle Erasmus—in fact almost a free-thinker—at that moment he meant just what he said. "And thank God for her mother."

He meant that, too, for even before Ruth came he had been the happiest husband in the world and made my mother the happiest wife, which was why I loved him and called him Dad.

"Go down to the school, Jeremy," he continued, "and send Jonathan up now. I think even that martinet, Mr. Paterson, will grant him a whole holiday for such an occasion. Jonathan is not a sentimentalist like us, but I don't think he'll be disappointed—and at least it will be better than lessons."

I suppose it was the effect of the little baby, but as I walked down the path from our house I seemed to be seeing everything with fresh eyes. The school, for instance. That had become just something I had left behind when I became a man, but now I thought of Ruth learning her lessons there, and I wondered whether Mr. Paterson would be teaching then. I supposed so, for he was still only forty though he had seemed so old to me once.

The lessons he gave us on Quail Island were quite different from those which had bored and puzzled me so much in Australia that I had often shammed sick so that my mother would keep me at home, and played hookey, too, if I couldn't make up a sickness.

He did not have to teach us history with lots of dates of kings and battles and names of people who had been dead centuries whom we didn't care about except to pass exams. Our history began with the sailing of the schooner, and we made it up as we went along; we lived it. We didn't have to learn geography with continents and rivers and mountains and seas and cities and maps to be drawn and who lived in this country and what that produced. Our only sea was the Pacific, our only country Quail Island, and the only products or people who mattered were our own. He didn't have to teach us French or geometry or mathematics or algebra or anything we didn't need. We didn't have to know about money and how to add and subtract and multiply

pounds, shillings and pence. There were so many things he didn't have to teach us.

As a result the things he did teach us he taught us well. To read and write and do plain arithmetic; to express ourselves; to enjoy books and poetry and games in which imagination and cleverness were needed; to use our hands skilfully in the working of wood and metal and stone; to know land and sea and how to use them; to know the birds and beasts and fishes and insects so that they weren't just names to us or things to eat or kill or throw stones at, but different people living in our world; to be good folk in our ways, which weren't always the same ways, and not to imagine that we could hurt others and wash it all out by going to church on Sunday and saying a few prayers.

He had helpers, too, of course. Aunt Grace for the girls, and the Swedish carpenter and the other experts for the trades.

But he was the school and the school was Mr. Paterson.

I suppose back in the world, his kind of schooling wouldn't have been enough, but as he could skip so much he was able to teach us to think and be ourselves.

Of course, I had been glad to leave school, like everybody else, but walking down the path that morning, and thinking of Ruth toddling that same path some day, I could hope that Mr. Paterson would be there to welcome her in and make her feel at home—Mr. Paterson in his shorts and vest and sandals, which was all he ever wore now, with his chest like a barrel and his brown, wise, keen, kind face—looking so unlike the coughing man aboard the schooner who'd made me think of Robert Louis Stevenson, let alone old skin-and-bones whom Uncle Erasmus had picked from the human rubbish dump of the Domain.

I looked at the school itself with new eyes, and felt proud of it.

It was our finest, our only, piece of architecture. It stood on the flat space between the stream and the cliff where we had held our first public meeting by the camp-fire. It was a fine roomy place, built solidly of logs, as high as a two-storied house and capable of holding everybody on the island. In the summer the sides lifted up and formed a kind of verandah running right round, so that the air flowed through

coolly, and in winter the sides were lowered and the place could be heated by the old galley stove from the schooner which made it very snug.

But the building was more than a school. Uncle Erasmus did not believe in waste.

On Sundays it was our church where he conducted the services, and after school hours it was our town hall and meeting-place and library and social club and playground and dance and concert hall. When we were building it, so large and solid and with so much labour, there were those who thought we might have been better employed, but my uncle was right, and now we all knew it.

In the same mood I looked about at the neat cabins which were our homes, cleared ploughed slopes where the crops made a brighter green—at the grazing herds of cows and the flocks of sheep—at the bullocks drawing a cartload of manure from the pigsties to the fields, and I marvelled at how much we had done under the guidance of God and Uncle Erasmus in four years that had passed so quickly and smoothly and busily that we had hardly noticed them going.

And it seemed to me my baby sister, Ruth, would grow up in a good world.

The parrots still flashed from tree to tree, the seabirds were a snowy blizzard against the blue above, and the ocean smiled under the hot sun.

Yes, a good world.

On such a day, of course, the school was open and Mr. Paterson came out to greet me as I drew near.

"I hear, Jeremy, that my future pupil is a very superior baby," he said.

"She's a peach, sir," I said, "and please could Jonathan have a holiday and go up and see her?"

"Of course," said Mr. Paterson, "I have only been awaiting the word. It is most important that our medical adviser of the day after to-morrow should make an early acquaintance with new-born babes."

We both laughed at that, for Uncle Erasmus had selected my brother Jonathan to be a doctor, and Dad Barnaby was teaching him all he knew of medicine and he was having special lessons at school.

Uncle Erasmus was still the master chess-player, using us

as his pawns. He faced the fact that one day even my new father would have to sleep in God's Acre beneath the carpet of white flowers, but Quail Island would still need its doctor.

II

Uncle Erasmus had laid it down that the Lord's Day should be joyous, once tribute had been paid to Him. He had no patience, he'd said long ago, with those who tried to paint the kind God as a sour old man with a liver who hated His children to play and laugh and be gay.

And so, when the morning service was over a little after nine, we played football or cricket or hockey or held athletics on the sports ground which had been laid out on a fine level place adjoining the beach. In the warm weather we could swim after the games. Sunday dinner was not eaten until half-past three, and be sure we brought good appetites to it. Afterwards was a lazy time, when people took their ease. In the evening there was another service round the camp-fire in the school grounds. This consisted mostly of hymns, which we enjoyed singing, Aunt Grace playing the little portable organ. When the service came to an end, we had a sing-song, for the gramophone was used seldom now because the records were wearing out, though we took great care of them, as we wanted to preserve them for big occasions like Christmas, and Deliverance Day, which was the anniversary of our coming to Quail Island and our second biggest holiday.

It was only on Sundays and special occasions that we stayed up late, for we kept the hours of the birds, having only candles for lights, and, rising at dawn, were quite ready for bed when the dark closed down.

I was too young and active to want to snooze after Sunday dinner, and so, indeed, was Uncle Erasmus. A custom had grown up that I should spend those hours at his house. It was a good time. I had been promoted from powder-monkey now. I had become his Ancient—which was a term he had found in Shakespeare and he liked it, even though Iago was Othello's Ancient, an omen, he had decided, we could afford to overlook.

So, on the Sunday after Ruth's advent, which was my birthday, I combed my hair and washed and tidied and went to see him as usual.

Uncle Erasmus did not live in a palace, as he might have had he wished. His cabin was no larger than any of the others, but it differed from them in being just one big room. A wooden bedstead, with planks instead of springs, stood in a corner, and there were cupboards and chests for his papers and belongings. It was odd to think that some of the chests were full of sovereigns, and that they were not even locked, since, had there been a thief on Quail Island, gold was the last thing he would wish to steal. The room was more like an office where someone slept than a home. And yet it was right, too—right for a big man like my uncle who had lived hard all his life. The sides opened up in the same way as those of the school, and they were closed only in the wildest weather. Through most of the year to be in my uncle's house was like camping in the open air, but camping under pleasant and comfortable conditions.

Uncle Erasmus still did his own mending and liked to look after himself in lots of ways, but Miss McGregor had taken charge of his cooking and the general care of his house. Nobody knew where he had found her, or why he had brought her to the Promised Land, for she was a silent, dour woman who never spoke of herself. She was tall and gaunt with a nut-cracker face, chin and nose almost meeting, and beady black eyes. As a kid I had been afraid of her, and the children of to-day were just the same. She didn't like children; she didn't like anyone—except Uncle Erasmus and she adored him, she would have died for him, though I don't believe they exchanged ten unnecessary words a year. The meals she cooked for him in the detached shed-kitchen at the back were marvels of cunning and art. It made your mouth water just to smell them, passing by.

My uncle knew how to treat Miss McGregor. He acted as if she didn't exist, and that suited her perfectly. In her own strange way she was supremely happy. When she was in her kitchen, and knew it wouldn't disturb him, she used to sing all the time in a reedy, silver kind of voice, queer, lilting, sad but gay songs in a foreign tongue which I guessed must be Gaelic. In the earlier days, before we just came to

accept her, it had been whispered that she had been a wardress in a woman's prison.

Nobody knew, however, and I don't see how she would have learned there to cook as she did, unless, of course, her love for Uncle Erasmus inspired her.

His house stood on a crest above the school, right in the centre of the settlement so that people could come to him easily and he could go to them. From it one could see most of the happenings of our world. I climbed the six steps and found him sitting in the big chair which had once stood on the poop of the schooner. It was worn now, but fitted his great body as cosily as ever. He was smoking his meerschaum, for, although the tobacco plants had never even taken root, those who already smoked made do with chopped-up pine needles flavoured with the leaves of a small bush. Some of the younger people who hadn't smoked anything else liked the mixture, but the three times I tried it I had been very sick, so I decided that smoking wasn't worth while. A lot of us felt like that.

It was different for Uncle Erasmus. He needed his pipe; it was part of him.

The big ledger in which I entered all the affairs of the island, births, marriages and deaths, lay open on his lap.

"Welcome, Jeremy, my Ancient," he said in his deep voice. "So you are seventeen to-day." I was surprised that he should know that. Perhaps my mother or Aunt Grace had told him, but it struck me it was more likely that he just knew and remembered it, as he knew and remembered everything. "Stand there, and let me look at you, boy. You youngsters sprout up so, and one pays no more heed than one does to a sapling, until, suddenly, in the wink of an eye, the sapling's a tree. Let me look at you, boy."

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, and came to attention because when Uncle Erasmus looked at you it was important.

He puffed blue and sticky-looking plumes of smoke, and the smell came sour-sweet to me.

Hawk nose thrust forward, he studied me and I studied him and saw that he had not changed an atom since that first afternoon when he had stood on the poop. He was still outside time. I could have birthdays—not Uncle Erasmus.

"Yes, Jeremy," he said, after a space, "the tree shapes

well. You are a Quail. The stock runs true. I would speak no ill of the dead, boy, but your father was not a true Quail. He was gentle and lovable, but a weakling, and he died. I would not have had you so. The blood has come back again in you, boy. You are of my breed, my father's grandson. That is good."

"Oh, thank you, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, just as if I were still a powder-monkey.

"And your mind, boy?" he said, giving his fierce moustache a lift. "Your mind, eh? Is that fossilizing? I recall when you joined me you were well read. Henty and Stevenson, wasn't it?—and Kipling—and yes, Sir H. H. Johnston. I would not prompt you, boy. What other than the Holy Bible—which you honour but don't read—what gives you the most satisfaction?"

It was a hard question. I turned it over carefully.

"Hamlet, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said at last. "It's a silly story, and I don't care about any of those stupid Danes and people, but it's the one thing I can read again and again."

My uncle was mightily delighted.

"I've said it all along—the makings, the makings. You couldn't have pleased me better, and it was an honest answer. Mark that, boy. Always make honest answers. Well, I have no present for you—not even a sovereign—save this: I am satisfied with you, Ancient. You still have the makings. And one day you will need them. But that is not for half a century, so we shall not give it another thought just now. Sit down, Ancient. Sit down." He waved me to the smaller edition of his own chair which had once been down in his brown box of a cabin. "I have been looking through our statistics, and they are not right."

"Not right, uncle?" I said, shocked, for I thought he meant I hadn't kept them properly.

"I am puzzled," he said, talking more to himself than me, as he often did. "I should have thought we would have bred like rabbits. No life could be healthier; there are none of the lets and hindrances which are supposed to check the birth-rate—no fear of poverty or lack of opportunity. You are a man grown now, boy, my Ancient, and I can speak freely to you. There are the long nights. One would think that would help. Well, boy?"

It was a difficult thing to talk about, and I stammered: "Well, sir, Uncle Erasmus, as to the last perhaps everybody's so healthily tired at night that they just want to go to sleep. But, of course, I don't know."

It seemed a silly answer, but my uncle nodded gravely.

"Unwittingly, I believe you've hit a nail on the head there, boy. Back in the world the labourer comes home weary, but he has a few beers aboard and so he demands his pleasure of his wife; the clerk comes home frustrated and short of cash, and the only pleasure available is his wife. All those people and the mass of others they represent, Ancient, are the breeders. They produce the millions, the cannon-fodder, the slaves. But the rich and the mighty, they live full lives and are happily occupied other than in bed. They are amused and comfortable. On Quail Island, without pausing to realize it, we are all rich and amused and comfortable. We are all the moneyed classes, because we have no money. We are no longer the labourers and clerks. The days are good and at night we sleep. Boy, Ancient, it's a nice point."

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I murmured, as a matter of politeness for I knew he wasn't talking to me.

"The Solomons. I thought I could count on them. Their tribe always increases. And yet, since the twins—nothing. Had they been in a ghetto these last four years the story would have been different. The Pearces. Jessie dragging her man back out of the tomb of the ocean, and the result—nothing. But you children never believed in Jessie Hawthorne, did you?"

The sudden question, out of that old time, made me shiver.

"No, sir, Uncle Erasmus."

"Odd little animals, children," said my uncle, and, continuing his own line of thought: "Of course, I did not choose for breeding purposes. I called those whom the Lord wished to escape. Long ago I said they were weaklings and failures and poor lost souls. I knew that. I was not selecting a stud from which to get a race of champions. Oh, yes, I grant you that, I grant you that," he said, quite crossly, but arguing with himself not with me. "The fact remains that more people have gone into God's Acre than have come into Quail Island. Of course, they were old; of course they were frail.

I had to bring them. But the fact remains—more deaths than births. That's bad."

He re-lit his pipe with a spill from the kindling box which smouldered beside him, and sat in thought, and, naturally, I did not intrude, but looked out across the valley lovely in the sunshine of late afternoon, golden and quiet and hushed with the great peace on it, and even the gulls drifting as if they were asleep on their white wings.

"Perhaps," said my uncle after a long pause, "I have been set a-thinking by Mary's baby. That is a baby to make more babies."

"Oh, yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, unable to miss the chance, "Ruth's a peach of a baby."

"There can be other peaches of babies," said my uncle. "Remember that, boy. You have to-morrow in your loins."

I didn't answer, because I was embarrassed by being brought into it suddenly like that. Of course, I knew what he meant, but I wasn't even thinking of marrying yet, let alone having a lot of babies. I was too occupied with being captain of the football team and learning all I could and just being me. I was happy at home with mother and Dad Barnaby and Jonathan, and all the fun we had and no worries, and swinging my shining axe and swimming and singing. The world was fine as it was, and I didn't want to change it. Anyway, whom could I marry? It didn't matter about my embarrassment, because Uncle Erasmus had forgotten me again.

"Perhaps it is the fruitful warmth of summer."

He remained staring out into the blue like an eagle, and following that same line of thought, whatever it was. And after another space he told me to bring him his banjo and a rum. I did so. There was still plenty of rum, and my uncle had brought vellums and strings for his banjo in special air-tight tins so that they would last his lifetime. He alone of all of us had accepted the fact that we were going to the Promised Land forever. Unlike Dad Barnaby his snuff had not run out. But then he was the wisest man in the world.

He wasn't much better on the banjo, and his voice was still more hearty than musical, but, having taken a good gulp of rum, he started to play and sing with such sheer enjoyment that I had to enjoy it, too. Even in these days he carried

a heavy burden, and it was good to see him amused. I just sat quietly, watching the birds and the valley and the dying afternoon, and wondering how I could improve my kick in the crawl to be sure of beating Davy Hawthorne who was my chief rival as a swimmer.

Davy had grown, too, of course—slim and tall with shining black hair and as handsome as a bronze statue. Extraordinary to remember that we had played snakes-and-ladders together when his sister was witching. But underneath the change he was still the same. If his sister had been witching this afternoon he would have wanted to get on with the game. He could never be bothered to read, but he was good at everything else. At cricket and football and hockey and with the plough he was a champion, and looked it, and knew it. The girls thought he was wonderful. We were always together, but I didn't like him as much as I should have.

My uncle went on with his singing. He loved the old, sentimental songs, and he let himself go on them now: "Lily of Laguna," "Just like the Ivy," "Under the Old Apple Tree," and "Honeysuckle and the Bee." He reeled off one after the other, only pausing to have me bring him another rum, but at last when the sun was low he laid aside the banjo, and sat smiling over those thoughts.

"It may be the fruitful warmth of summer, boy," he said again, abruptly, "but I think I shall marry your Aunt Grace."

That was the greatest shock he ever gave me.

I sat there with my mouth open and my eyes round, and his songs and his mention of Ruth and his worry about the birth-rate suddenly all fitted together into an answer I could never have guessed. And running with this was the memory of that evening when, lost in the shadow of the boat, I had heard Aunt Grace tell my mother that she thought she would marry Uncle Erasmus. So much had happened, and the time had passed so smoothly, and I had been so busy growing up, that I had almost forgotten. Now, for the first time, it struck me as how odd it was that she hadn't done so already, for, in addition to being the loveliest lady who ever lived, my Aunt Grace knew what she wanted and made a point of getting it. Yet through all this time she had not raised a finger. But perhaps that was clever of her. You didn't get

Uncle Erasmus by raising a finger. You waited until he wanted you.

"Why—why—Uncle Erasmus, sir!" was all I could stammer.

"Why not, boy? Why not, my Ancient? Damn' fine woman. Do you think me too old, popinjay? Do you think I'm not worthy?"

"Oh, no, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, with all my heart, because though Aunt Grace was more my girl at seventeen than she had been when Naomi told me so, I knew she wasn't for me, and there was nobody else in the whole world worthy of her except Uncle Erasmus.

"'She's my lily and my rose,'" said Uncle Erasmus, quoting from one of his songs. "I'll show you, boy. I'll show you what it is to be a man. She'll take me, boy—rough as I am, beard and all."

I might have set his mind at rest on that point, and yet I couldn't because what I had heard that night was a secret and my mother had been shocked to think Aunt Grace wouldn't know that, and Aunt Grace had kissed me to show she was sorry for doubting. Aunt Grace had kissed me, such a long time ago.

"Another rum, Ancient," said my uncle, strumming gaily on the arm of his chair and humming "Yip-i-addy-i-ay" like a schoolboy with whiskers.

III

As I turned back with the rum the sun had set and the sky was all mother-of-pearl, every pastel shade there could be, glittering and glowing, and against that background, radiant, twirling a silly little sunshade which only she would have bothered to carry on Quail Island, stood my Aunt Grace. She wore the new frock which Miss Titgens had made for her. It was scarlet—Aunt Grace's best colour—and Miss Titgens could have made it only for her. Miss Titgens was like Mr. Solomon in that—the general run of her clothes was ordinary enough, but when she had some personality to express she could do so. Miss Titgens had been starving genteelly to death as a seamstress in a back street in North

Sydney when Uncle Erasmus met her by chance in a tram. She hadn't had her fare in her worn purse, and he had paid the twopence and taken her away with him.

Now she had repaid him by making Aunt Grace a dress that couldn't have been bettered for that moment. The sight of her standing there made me gulp. Not only the surprising rightness of her coming at that moment, but the sheer loveliness of the picture she made.

She smiled, her teeth so white between her red and curly lips, just as if she'd been biting an apple.

Uncle Erasmus came to his feet all in one movement as he could although he was such a big man. He made her a bow, a bushman's bow, not a courtier's, the bow a man makes from his heart when he seldom sees a beautiful and delicate lady.

"Why, Grace," he said, "how opportune. Speak of the angels——!"

Aunt Grace put down the silly little sunshade, but remained where she was because she knew that her background was perfect. I had dumped the glass on the table and stood just staring.

"Pooh, Erasmus, how that rum reeks," she said, smiling still and including me. "How you can stomach the stuff! No matter. You're you. But do I gather you've been talking of me, you and my Jeremy?"

It was like her to call me her Jeremy.

In the bare, man's room, with its smell of pine-needle tobacco and rum, and against the wide and empty sky, she looked so dainty, so civilized, so feminine, like a Dresden china figure come to warm and glowing flesh and blood.

And, being Aunt Grace, she knew we hadn't just been mentioning her name but really talking about her, which brought a colour to her ivory cheeks and a wicked, challenging light into her black-opal eyes.

"Why, yes," said Uncle Erasmus. "Why, yes. Indeed, we had. Why, yes."

He moved slightly from foot to foot, looking down at her.

"Excuse me, Uncle Erasmus, sir," I gasped. "I think I better be going."

"Why, Jeremy——!" Aunt Grace protested, as if she were hurt.

"No, boy, stay," said Uncle Erasmus. "Stay, Ancient.

We have been talking about this lady, and you know what is in my mind. I am not a hobbledehoy that I need bushes in the dark, or the stuffy privacy of the front parlour, to do my courting."

"Courting, sir, Uncle Erasmus?" said Aunt Grace, mimicking the tone in which I would have said it to perfection.

"Courting, ma'am," my uncle said, fiercely, twisting up his moustache. "Courting! I have been thinking things over—a lot of things—to do with the welfare of this community. I have been thinking about you. You are the best-looking, most attractive, most female woman on Quail Island."

"Yes, Erasmus, I agree with you," said Aunt Grace, coolly. "But——?"

"I have decided, Grace, that you have wasted enough of your years as friend to Mary and a part-time school-ma'm. You are breeding stock, girl!"

He glared at her.

"You call me 'girl,' Erasmus," said Aunt Grace, "but you make me feel like a brood mare."

I wished I were anywhere else, and yet I would not have been anywhere else for a fortune, supposing any fortune would have been of use to me.

"Brood mare, fiddlesticks and bosh," said my uncle, much louder than he intended. "And yet, why not a brood mare? They're beautiful, too. So are stallions. So are all God's creatures when they are about their natural business. Ma'm, Grace, you are not a child. A man like me, at my age, can't insult such a woman with namby-pamby love talk filched from books. I am Erasmus Quail. You know me. What I was—what I am. I am asking you, Grace, to marry me."

I gave a great gasp which passed unnoticed, and stood there, stiff and still, for I had never expected to hear any man, not even Uncle Erasmus, propose to Aunt Grace.

She dropped down in a low curtsy, as if he were an emperor and she a princess. It was the most graceful movement, like a flower bending before a breeze. And remaining so, perfectly balanced and at ease on her tiny feet, she looked up at him, grave yet sparkling.

"Why, Erasmus," she said, "that is the finest compliment I have ever had paid to me."

"You have had many compliments, Grace."

"And deserved them, Erasmus."

"And deserved them, Grace. What is your answer?"

Aunt Grace stood up as effortlessly as she had dropped down on her heels. She walked across to the table, put her sunshade on it, and lifted herself up on its edge as lightly as if she weighed nothing at all. From there she regarded my uncle with fondness, admiration and amusement, looking so provocative and mischievous and at the same time clever, that it was a marvel to me he did not march across and wrap her forever in his bear's embrace.

But Uncle Erasmus just swivelled about and waited.

"Erasmus," she said, "once upon a time I decided to marry you."

"The devil you did, Grace!" said my uncle, startled out of his poise.

"Indeed, it's true. Jeremy here can bear witness, for he heard me say it, and was horrified. Didn't you hear me, Jeremy?"

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said.

"But that was aboard the *Quail* in the early days when I was young and foolish. Since then, in this retreat of ours, I have learnt many things, and I have learnt to admire and revere you—yes, revere you, Erasmus—much more than I did then. But, because of all this, my ambitions have changed. Would you care to lay your hand on your Bible, Erasmus, and swear you loved me?"

Uncle Erasmus looked uneasy.

"Love?" he said. "What is love? I love everyone. I love you. I would make you my wife."

"What is love? he asks, Jeremy, and he would make me his wife. And a very fine, grand, great husband I should have, too—one worthy of the belle of Quail Island. Yet, Jeremy, he asks, What is love?" She laughed, but kindly. "Erasmus, dear," she said, "you don't love me. You don't even want me, except that you feel a good brood mare is running to waste. You love only your mission, your Promised Land. It is your life, your all. You couldn't have done it otherwise, you wouldn't have thought of it, and if you had you would have failed. You have succeeded beyond wildest dreams because you love it with all your heart and soul and mind and body. That is the reason. Quail Island is your

mistress, Erasmus—your beautiful and satisfying and altogether perfect mistress and wife. Miss McGregor is all the woman you need, and all you should clutter up your life with. Come, Erasmus, you are a wise man. Did you think me so wise?"

My uncle tugged his beard and regarded her like an eagle focussing on a pretty, tempting chicken.

"Upon my soul, Grace," he marvelled, quite lost for words for once. "Upon my soul! Upon my soul!"

And I found myself echoing the baffled exclamation, for it had never occurred to me that any woman on earth wouldn't have jumped at the chance of marrying Uncle Erasmus. But, all the same, at the back of my mind, there grew a conviction that she was right. My uncle didn't love her, and didn't need her. He only wanted to make sure she would play her part in the history of Quail Island and help to make it go on. I was glad in my heart that she had seen the point, for my Aunt Grace was too perfect to be married without love. It wouldn't have been any better than if she'd married the Commercial Bank back in Sydney, not even though her husband would have been Uncle Erasmus.

Sitting there, balanced on the edge of the table, as light as a bird, she raised her finger at my uncle.

"But be of good cheer, Erasmus," she said. "You have offered yourself as a sacrifice, and have escaped the altar. Yet I have news for you, and good news, which will set your mind at rest—your heart, I know, is not concerned. Indeed, this news is what brought me here. I came to-night, as an act of courtesy, to ask your agreement, as my sovereign lord and pastor and very good friend, to my marriage."

"Your marriage?" roared my uncle, again louder than he knew, and again I echoed him.

"My marriage," said Aunt Grace. "It isn't much of a match, I suppose, to land the local dominie, but I assure you neither of us asks, What is love?"

"Great God and goats," said my uncle, which were words, I'm sure, he hadn't used since his prospecting days, "you mean Paterson, old skin-and-bones?"

"Old skin-and-bones," said Aunt Grace, proudly, fondly. "And I don't think, Erasmus, you will have cause to feel you must needs take desperate measures to prevent a

good brood mare going to waste for the sake of Quail Island."

My uncle clapped his hands together in glee, and he didn't seem at all like a man whose offer of marriage had just been rejected but like a condemned man reprieved.

"This is news, as you say, this is grand news," he cried. "I couldn't have wished it otherwise." He picked up his glass, drained it, and said: "Boy, bring another rum. I must drink to this."

"I thought you would," smiled Aunt Grace. "And you will always have Miss McGregor."

"Miss McGregor?" said Uncle Erasmus, forgetting for the moment in his relief. "Ah, yes, of course. A paragon of a woman. No trouble at all, and a fine cook. Hardly opens her mouth. Miss McGregor, yes." I gave him the glass. "I drink to you, Grace, my dear girl, and to your fortunate husband-to-be. You will be happy together, and you will be sharing a great work, for Quail Island belongs to to-morrow as well as to-day, and you must teach the young idea how to shoot. You have done well up to date. Now you will do better. Grace, my dear, we are adults, and so is our Jeremy now. I can speak what I feel. Do not forget, Grace, that in the wombs of the women of Quail Island is the real to-morrow."

Aunt Grace dropped down from the table and made him the mocking ghost of her curtsy.

"Oh, sir, Uncle Erasmus, you make me blush," she said, mimicking me again, "but be sure this woman of Quail Island won't forget. It will be nothing but a pleasure to remember."

She looked cheekily bold and brazen, as they'd said she had when she loaned her bathing costume on the beach, but though I was so happy in her happiness I couldn't but feel a bit empty and sad to think that my best girl was going to be Mrs. Paterson, the schoolmaster's wife.

Uncle Erasmus pulled out his great gold watch.

"Here," he said, "we must be off, or we'll be late for evensong."

He gulped the rest of his rum, and we went down the path towards the camp-fire through the calm, sweet dusk. Aunt Grace slipped her arm through mine as if she knew that though I was glad for her it hadn't been all fun.

IV

The camp-fire blazed merrily, creating its warm pool of gold and flickering shadows which swooped about like giant bats. We were all very happy about the news of the forthcoming wedding which Uncle Erasmus had announced, and we were singing the old songs which somehow lasted better than those from the newest musical comedies, but then, of course, our newest musical comedies were four years out-of-date. People in the world had forgotten them, and were concerned with present-day successes. But they, too, might still have been enjoying the choruses of the past—the hearty, roistering popular songs of the music-halls—which did not die. We didn't pause to think of that, but, looking back, I believe it was the explanation.

Anyway, there was Aunt Grace, bubbling with spirits, making the organ do things its makers never dreamt of, and Uncle Erasmus was busy over his banjo, and we were all shouting at the top of our voices:

Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do,
I'm half crazy all for the love of you—
It won't be a stylish marriage
We can't afford a carriage
But you'll look sweet
Upon the seat
Of a bicycle built for two.

The great stars looked down over the sentinel files of pines, and birds beat about, pretending to have been frightened from their sleep, but really enjoying it too.

Perhaps the words weren't quite right—for all our songs were sung from memory—but we let them go with gusto.

Daisy, Daisy—

The chorus broke off, the organ wailed into silence as if startled out of breath, and the banjo subsided in a dying twang.

Out of the black wall of night came the strangest sight we had ever seen on Quail Island—a man who had never been

there until that moment, a new face, a new body, a new personality—someone we didn't know existed on the face of the earth.

No one moved, no one spoke. We sat frozen, staring, gaping, unable to credit the evidence of our eyes.

The impossible stranger was a big man—as big as Uncle Erasmus—dressed in navy blue trousers and sleeveless vest, of coarse, stained flannel. He was very blond. His hair, which should have been close-clipped, stood up in a tangled mass; his face, which should have been pink and clean-shaven, was black and draped with a clotted beard. He burst from the wall of night with a swimming motion of his muscular arms, as if he had to tear it apart to enter the warm, safe, friendly house our fire built. He seemed about to fall, but, bracing himself on his bare feet, he waved with his right arm back towards the beach from whence he had come, and, that accomplished, pitched forward like a tree falling.

"Oh, drat and bother!" said my uncle in his beard. "This is a nuisance. This shouldn't have happened. Oh, what a pity!"

In that first instant he knew, for when he spoke like that, almost like an old maid, it showed he was deeply stirred and wasn't concerned with his words but only with his thoughts.

He had to take charge. He put his banjo aside, and stood up.

"We have an uninvited guest," he said. "A castaway, a ship-wrecked mariner. We must make him welcome. The Greens' house is nearest. Carry him there, and see to him. You and Grace, Paterson, and Murphy and Peterson and Green. Somebody call Dr. Barnaby. See to it. There are others on the beach apparently. Come."

He strode quickly to the fire and picked out a burning brand. Others followed his example, and we surged away in an exciting, excited torchlight procession, ripping a path of blood-red through the night which had been so deep and peaceful until the stranger came.

When we reached the beach the sea was lapping quietly as if nothing had happened, but following the tracks of the unsteady feet we came to the white ghost of a ship's boat, and flooding it with the light of our torches we saw that, though it was so big, it only held the limp body of a fair-

haired boy with a flag over him like a sheet. Just the tip of her stern was touching the sand, the sea holding her there. We hauled her up, and my uncle looked at the boy who had the name "Gretel" and a heart pierced by an arrow on his right arm.

"He is alive, but far spent," said Uncle Erasmus. "Take him up gently, poor boy from the sea."

It was in this fashion that the two survivors from the German commerce raider *Stettin* came to Quail Island, bringing the world with them.

CHAPTER VII

I

IN his wisdom Uncle Erasmus would have been glad enough if the men had died without recovering consciousness. He told me so that first night as I walked back with him to his house. It seemed a brutal thing for such a good man to say, and I did not see what we had to fear from them. But Uncle Erasmus knew things by instinct; the Lord, as he said, nudged him.

"Our peace is menaced," he told me, though up to that time they had not opened their lips. "They bring disturbance and unrest and war to Quail Island. It is a bad business. If only we were happy savages we would tap them on the head with our clubs, and that would solve every problem. But, alackaday, we are civilized Christians, and so, since they come to us sick and broken and claiming sanctuary, we must nurse them back to health and strength and then grapple with the situation. No doubt, however, the Lord knows best. It may well be life had grown too smooth and soft. He works in a mysterious way, Ancient. We must not question."

But his face was grave and worried.

And so, by his orders, they were nursed back to life with every care and consideration. Dad Barnaby went often to the Greens' house, and to Jim Pearce's where the younger man had been taken, because, as the Pearces had no family,

there was room to spare. The Germans' state was worse than that in which our sailors had been. They had had neither food nor water for ages and their privations had left them very weak. For a time it looked as if Uncle Erasmus would get the wish he could not really wish, but then they rallied.

Uncle Erasmus visited them in the houses where they were being nursed, and we learned a little about them.

The big man's name was Carl von Schomberg, and he had been captain of a ship called the *Stettin*, which he described as a "commerce raider"—a term which meant nothing to us. The younger was Mark Holtz, a junior officer, a lieutenant. They both spoke English, and were, it seemed, very rude and not at all grateful for being saved from death. The Pearces and the Greens and Dad Barnaby agreed that they were horrid patients.

It was all very strange, because the only Germans we knew as Germans were the fat and comfortable people, with stomachs and moustaches, who stood on street corners and played pom-pomby-pom music on big brass instruments, and it was always said that they couldn't even play if you sucked a lemon in front of them. Yes, Germans, as such, were members of a German band. There was a song about them:

I want my Fritz
Who plays twiddly bits
On his big trombone.

We used to sing it on Sunday evenings.

But these Germans didn't belong in that song. Though they were still convalescing, their presence made a difference to Quail Island. It wasn't only Uncle Erasmus who knew. He, having found out the simple facts about them, stopped at that. But the rest of us were puzzled and curious and unquiet, so that there was no more peace, but a kind of buzz and stir and we waited to hear what news they had brought and why they made us unhappy, and why it would have been far better for us if they had perished in their open boat on the lonely sea.

II

The summer of 1918 was very kind. Even on that April day there was no hint of autumn. The air was golden and warm, and the sea sparkled. A working day, but nobody went to work, except those who had the milking and such tasks to do and they scamped through the jobs and drifted back. In a world as small as ours where there is little news, the news that the Germans were to leave their rooms for the first time put an end to all ordinary activities.

And there they were, walking up and down the strip of path in front of the Greens' house.

They wore the clothes in which they had landed, but at my uncle's order Tim Martin had made them sandals. They hadn't sent a word of thanks to him; they hadn't thanked anyone, not even their hosts, not even Uncle Erasmus. They took everything as a matter of course, and now walked stiffly up and down as if they had pokers up their backs, as if they were still on their own ship. Captain von Schomberg had a rimless monocle in his eye. It might have been part of his face. He must have had it in his pocket that night he tore the darkness aside and came into our world. Scars slashed his cheeks. The pair talked in their own language, and Mark Holtz, the fair boy, always said Jah! Jah! and bent a little in agreement.

We didn't want to be rude, but we had to see them. In ones and twos, singly and by families, we drifted down and stood about. Even the children did not go to school, for Mr. Paterson was there and Aunt Grace. In fact soon all the life of Quail Island stood still, and the only person who wasn't there was Uncle Erasmus.

If we were lacking in manners to stare at them, the two strangers from the sea were even worse; naturally we were curious and anxious and uneasy, but they looked down at us as if they strolled in a zoo and we were a queer lot of animals. To the friendly but tentative greetings we offered the big man inclined his head, a superior creature who heard but did not deign to answer.

Yet we couldn't go away.

Suddenly they laughed together, as if at a great joke, and von Schomberg took the young man's elbow and they went up on to the verandah of the house and the big man faced us with Holtz standing stiffly a little behind him. Mr. Green, the barber, had clipped his guest's blond hair very close and shaved his face clean. He didn't look at all like the man who had come out of the night. His monocle sat in his face, bright and sure as the sun in heaven. He made a haughty gesture inviting us to draw closer, and we had to do so, reluctantly, shuffling, like a lot of yokels, which, we knew, was how he regarded us.

"So," he said, and his voice was guttural and grunting like the notes of Fritz's trombone in the song but not funny all the same, threatening, "so! Even happy Utopians want the news. I have news for you. Much news. Let me tell you."

Ah, he had news and he told us.

The terrible, incredible news.

Life had gone so quietly that sometimes it seemed only a week ago that we had sailed from Sydney in the *Quail*, and we had always assumed that the world was wagging on as we remembered it.

That stranger from the sea, Captain von Schomberg of the *Stettin*, gloating and cruel, standing stiff as a ramrod on the verandah of the Greens' house, disillusioned us, and loved doing it.

Out there behind the serene sky—war.

We had sailed—surely only yesterday?—from a sane world. Captain von Schomberg brought us tidings of a criminal lunatic asylum. He presented us in his heavy, pounding words, like the rumble of artillery at a military review in the Domain, with a new and hideous world of death, destruction, bloodshed and horror—of all the terrible things which my uncle's prophetic eye had foreseen, the things he had hoped we should never even know about in the Promised Land.

And to make it worse, Captain von Schomberg seemed to regard his tragic tale as natural and normal, even grand and exciting, fun.

His countrymen were no longer playing in German bands.

Germany, attacked by all the nations of the world, was defeating them. He rolled off the list of nations, proudly, and

we could hardly believe our ears. The British, the French, the Americans, the Russians, the Italians, the Japanese—on and on went the list, and he rejoiced in its length. Even little countries in South America were fighting against Germany, even the Portuguese.

Yet Germany was winning. Germany before the year was out would be victorious and master of the world. The Kaizer would be ruler of all mankind, and all the nations would be Germany's slaves.

He gave us his word of honour, as an officer in the Imperial German Navy. There could be no doubt, no mistake.

The British Navy, the boasted British Navy, lay at the bottom of the German Ocean.

The armies of Britain, France and America were being bled white in bloody battles. Futile Italy was just a joke. Paris would fall, then England, and the Peace of Berlin would be signed before a new calendar was needed—the Peace of Berlin which would decide the course of the world's history for a thousand years.

We had come from Australia, he remembered.

Oh, yes, the Australians.

They were fighting, too. They had tried to fight the Turks, and had been driven back into the sea at a place called Gallipoli, after months of futile campaigning, and leaving thousands and thousands of dead behind.

This thing, striking nearer what had been home, seemed the greatest marvel of all to us.

We had been listening in horrified silence but now Mr. Murphy spoke up.

"In the name of God, sir," he said, "what would the Australians be doing fighting the Turks?"

"The Turks," said Captain von Schomberg, "knew on which side was the butter of their bread."

"But begging your pardon," Mr. Murphy persisted, "those Turks, with their harems and Turkish Delight, how could they be beating the brave boys from down under that licked the Boers and all?"

"Under German leadership," said Captain von Schomberg, "the Turks were more than a match for a lot of colonial scum, the sons of convicts."

There was a kind of surge and murmur, but we were not

ourselves. We had to hear more. Perhaps Quail Island had softened us, perhaps we were like the small brown hens of Quail Island in the presence of a snake such as had never been there before.

The war was won, he said. Had not he himself sunk a hundred thousand tons of Allied shipping whilst he roamed the seas.

"Ah, captain," said Lord Nelson suddenly, "speaking with all due respect as a seafaring man meself, though no officer, what happened then?—for you come here in an open boat with only a vest to your back."

Had we been our real selves we should have raised a cheer at that, but we were too bemused.

And Captain von Schomberg screwed his monocle harder in his hard face, but did not answer. Instead he went on to talk of aeroplanes and the airships of Count von Zeppelin, raining death on England, bombing London to a heap of ruins, so that when the Kaiser came to ride in triumph to Buckingham Palace it would take a week to clear the streets for him.

In our day the aeroplane had been a novel toy which gave exhibitions when the weather was good enough. Few of us had even seen one.

And yet our day was only yesterday.

We wanted him to stop, we wanted to shut our ears, we wanted him to fall down dead, and yet, morbidly, we wanted to hear more.

My eye rested on Mr. Paterson, standing with Aunt Grace, his face sad and set.

He had never had to teach us history. He was learning a sorry history lesson this morning.

"So," said Captain von Schomberg at long last, and we were glad and yet sorry, "you wanted the news, you Utopians. You have had it. Enough. I am weary. Mr. Green! Mrs. Green! Make yourselves busy. Come, Carl."

Holtz clicked his heels and saluted, and he saluted Holtz, with the same click of heels, and then he took Holtz by the elbow again and they marched off into the house. They were talking in their own tongue, and their stiff shoulders shook with laughter at the shock they had given us.

The parrots flashed and above the gulls cried thin and

harsh. The pines stood sentinel. Everything looked the same on Quail Island, but in the hot, noonday sunshine we were cold and numb and silent.

III

"Tell me," said Uncle Erasmus.

Outside the cicadas shrilled and the birds were noisy, but these sounds were so much a part of our lives that they did not register any more. We were alone in his big, airy room, and it should have been quiet and peaceful and hushed. It wasn't. The air seemed to be troubled by sounds which one didn't hear in the ordinary way with your ears, a buzz like that which hangs about a beehive, a low hum like that of a great city. I knew what it was, of course—it was a kind of vibration set up by all the excited talk which went on in every corner of our community.

Uncle Erasmus had seen the gathering that morning outside the Greens' house, and he knew we knew. He heard the agitation in the air just as I did. His face was thoughtful, and he puffed slowly at his meerschaum.

I told him. Be sure I had not forgotten a single word. I never would be able to do so. The news had burst so suddenly, so redly, like one of those bombs the airships were dropping on London. And yet as I talked I could hardly believe what I was saying. It seemed rather as if I was telling of a nightmare or jabbering in delirium.

Uncle Erasmus did not interrupt me. He did not exclaim or ask questions, but just went on smoking, looking out into the sky but not seeing it, his face so still that it might have been carved in gold.

It occurred to me that this news was no news to him. He had read it in the glow of his lonely camp-fire in the dark ranges; he had heard it as he tramped through the empty silences of the limitless plains, his heavy swag slung on his great shoulders. That was why he had known what to do when he made the Daybreak strike.

"Thank you, my Ancient," he said when I had done at last. "I am glad to find your ears remain young and you can still listen."

He made no other comment, but sat thinking. I was disappointed at first, for somehow I had hoped in his wisdom he would say a lot of things which would help me grasp what had happened to the world out there. But then I saw that his silence was wisdom, for there are some things that are too big for words.

The crunch of footsteps sounded on the path, and Lord Nelson came up the steps. He was followed by Mr. Solomon, the tailor, and Mr. Green and half a dozen of the older men who formed a cluster behind him. Lord Nelson looked embarrassed and twirled his invisible cap.

"Your pardon for intruding, sir, Mr. Quail, when you might well be taking a nap," he said, "but these men here have made me their sort of a kind o' spokesman, though the job isn't one I'm suited for or ever wanted. But there it is."

"And what have you come to tell me, Lord Nelson?"

"It's about this news the Germans have brought, sir, Mr. Quail. Ah, proper nasty, proper nasty. The world, it seems, is in a ruddy mess, if you'll excuse the term, according to these here Germans. And what these men here want me to say, sir, Mr. Quail, is how grateful they are to you, sir, for having the foresight to spy all this was in the offing and to whisk us away to this nice Promised Land before it all happened. They think it was right clever and good of you, Mr. Quail, sir, and they're glad they didn't go back in that tug *Powerful* that time, let alone want to go with us in that perishin' boat. They wants you to know, sir, Mr. Quail, they're proper grateful, and they're sorry they ever thought you was laying it on a bit thick with your talk of all the troubles the world was runnin' into at a speed of knots. We thanks you, Mr. Quail, sir."

Uncle Erasmus stood up and made them a bow.

"Lord Nelson, men," he said, "a handsome tribute, and I value it. My thanks for your thanks, and may all the people of Quail Island show the same good sense, for I smell trouble in the air."

"Me, too," said Lord Nelson. "We was also wondering, sir, what you plan to do with these here Germans, sir, Mr. Quail. They may be our guests and all o' that, like you say, but ah, they're proper nasty. We was wondering, sir, Mr. Quail, if we couldn't be rid o' 'em. They hang round the

place like a bad smell. We was wondering, sir, Mr. Quail, if you couldn't stock them up with provisions and water and push 'em off in their boat again so that they could get on with their war and leave us to get on with our peace."

Heads wagged endorsement, and Mr. Solomon held out his hands, palms upwards, and hunched his shoulders, asking if this wasn't most reasonable and right.

Uncle Erasmus considered.

"Nothing would give me more pleasure than to see the back of them," he said. "They are unmannerly boors and not fit to dwell in Eden. But, as you know, Lord Nelson"—and he twinkled at him—"people who have had long experience of voyaging in open boats are not very eager for a second dose. If they refused to go I don't see how we could force them."

"There's only two of them there Germans, Mr. Quail, sir. There's a lot of us. Couldn't we take 'em by the scruff of their necks and sling 'em into their boat and tell them to hook it?"

"And supposing they came back?"

"Then not allow 'em to land, sir, Mr. Quail. They didn't have much mercy when they was sinking all those ships, and I don't see we should show 'em any. Proper pirates, that's what they are. Nasty! If you was to string 'em both up for murder it wouldn't be no more than their deserts, Mr. Quail, sir. And I wouldn't mind being hangman, neither, though it's not a job I'd ever be craving in the ordinary course of events."

"But suppose, Lord Nelson, the Lord sent them here for His own good reasons?"

"More likely old Nick, if I may make so bold, Mr. Quail, sir. Proper pals of his they are. Nasty! You should hear, sir, how they're bullying and badgering the barber and his missus who've been as good as gold to them, sir, Mr. Quail, though only on your orders and because they're scared."

"You're right, Lord Nelson—proper nasty!" said Uncle Erasmus. "I must decide what's to be done. If they had not come to us as shipwrecked mariners it would be easier. We must be patient a while. Perhaps they are inflicted on us as a cross in return for many mercies."

"Proper nasty!" said Lord Nelson, sucking in his cheeks and puffing out his lips, his seal's eyes unhappy.

IV

The surf beat on the outer rocks, sending up great clouds of silver spray in which rainbows drifted, and setting the long brown arms of the kelp writhing and twisting like angry sea-serpents. The constant boom of the ocean rang thunderously in the air, and sea and sky seemed a brighter blue down there. The gulls swooped and wheeled, or stood neat on their dainty red feet, watching us as we worked.

Davy Hawthorne and I were gathering the salt from the pans. At intervals the big shallow pools in the inner rocks were flooded, and then the sea was shut off again and the sun drew up the moisture, leaving the glistening white harvest behind. It had seemed strange at first to go to so much bother to make salt, which back in Australia had just been something in the cruet you hardly noticed eating, but Uncle Erasmus had said salt was a necessity and so the making of it became one of our industries.

It wasn't an easy job, stooping and scraping the stuff into the sacks we had brought, but it was nice out on the noisy rocks with the Pacific hammering to get at us. The nearness of the ocean, and all the noise and movement, were exhilarating. On the calmest day it seemed to be windy and boisterous, so that you felt excited, as if you were battling with a storm.

And as we worked we thought, like everybody else on Quail Island, of the Germans. They were always spreading more of their evil news, and it drifted through our lives like a fever-breeding fog. "The Germans say that ——" "According to the Germans——" The words were repeated a hundred times a day.

Now it was the submarines which were cutting England off from the rest of the world by sinking all the ships that tried to get there, so that very soon the people would be starving to death and cry for peace on any terms; now it was that the great Kitchener of Khartoum had been drowned on a torpedoed cruiser, leaving the English armies without a leader; or, it might be how Russia, the bear that walks like a man which Mr. Kipling had taught us to fear, mighty Russia, had been so humbled that the Czar had been over-

thrown and all those millions of soldiers had surrendered in abject defeat; or again it might be news of the sinking of the great *Lusitania* as a deliberate affront to the United States.

Yes, there was always some fresh item of news, and always the news was bad.

So that, when our sacks were filled and we sat on them to enjoy a rest, it was almost inevitable that we spoke of the horrible strangers from the sea.

"I been thinking, all the same," said Davy. "I been thinking, Jeremy. I don't see how they can be doing all the winning, like they claim. It doesn't make sense. I'll bet there's a lot they're leaving out. I think good old Lord Nelson hit a nail on the head that very first day."

"You mean when he asked them what had happened to their ship?"

"That's right," said Davy, "and if you come to think, they didn't answer. They left that bit out. Now them arriving the way they did shows their ship was sunk or captured or something. Perhaps by a Dreadnought. But they didn't tell us about that, did they? Mum as oysters when it came to something going wrong. How do we know that there aren't a helluva lot of things going wrong they're mum about, too?"

Generally, at least in talk, I still took the lead with Davy though he was more than a match for me in most ways. The fact that he had all this to say out of his own head showed the Germans had changed him, too.

"I believe you may be right, Davy," I said, and felt happier than I had since they came.

For his words made sense. Particularly that about their ship. For all his arrogance and bounce, and his monocle stuck in his eye, Captain von Schomberg had lost his ship though he wouldn't admit it.

"I know I am," said Davy, and he looked shrewder and keener and older than he had only a week ago and it made me realize that we kids who had left Sydney were growing up into men. "There's another thing, too, Jeremy, I been wanting to say to you, but for God's sake don't go and tell your uncle."

"If you don't want me to, of course I won't," I said

indignantly. "What do you think I am? His spy or something?"

"Well, you're closer to him someway than the rest of us. Almost like as if you were his son. But I believe you. If you say you won't, you won't. Well, this other thing is this, and I'm not the only one who's wondering it—whether things are going as bad as the Germans say, or whether they're losing more fights than just Schomberg's, do you think we got any right to go on sitting on our backsides on Quail Island and doing nothing about it?"

Why, it seemed only a week or so since I had been beating Davy at snakes-and-ladders, and here he was flooring me with a question like that.

Oh, we were growing up all right.

I couldn't find an answer for a moment.

"But Quail Island is our home. We belong here."

"Or are we hiding here? You're the clever one, reading books and all that and talking to Uncle Erasmus—you should know. What if we should be fighting out there along with all the rest of the English instead of twiddling our thumbs in the shade of the sheltering pine?"

"But damn it all, Davy," I said, "if Uncle Erasmus had the sense to bring us here and we had the sense to come, why should we worry about all the mess back there. We gave up lots of things to come here—most people back there would think our lives as dull as ditchwater—and so—well, we've bought our right to be peaceful here."

"There's that," Davy agreed.

"Besides, how could we get away from Quail Island?"

"In the two boats. We could let the Germans run them."

"And how would we know they weren't just taking us to some German island where we'd be prisoners of war and no use at all and have lost all this for nothing?"

"There's that," said Davy. "It might be better to leave them behind."

"And what about what happened when Lord Nelson and the sailors tried to do it?"

"There's that," said Davy, who always listened to what I said. "Maybe it's just silly talk on account of the Germans coming. I wish they hadn't."

"So do I!" I said.

"So do I!" said Naomi, who had come up behind us, bringing us a big billy-can of lemon drink as she often did when we went to the salt pans because it was thirsty work there.

It wasn't like lemonade in Australia for we made it from fruits of a small bush which weren't lemons at all, but it tasted all right when you were dry.

"Here you are, Davy," she said, handing it to him. "Couldn't bear to think of you in the great salt desert."

Naomi didn't get sweet on boys like the other girls did, but she would do anything for Davy and I couldn't blame her, for Davy was all right in his way.

Thinking how he had grown up I looked at Naomi, not just seeing her as someone who was always about, which is the way one gets in a small world where there aren't many people and the same faces are around all the time.

She had grown up, too, though she still was Naomi and not like the other girls.

For one thing she didn't wear frocks, like they did, but short pants and a blouse made of spotted print which Miss Titgens made for her. She had started wearing them soon after we came to Quail Island, and had just gone on. They seemed so right on her that I don't believe anybody had ever noticed them until I did at that moment. Her legs were bare, and she had sandals on her feet. There was a ribbon of the same print in her hair, instead of the string she had worn when she came to us. Her eyes were still big and grey and challenging, and her nose still turned up, and the freckles still showed through the gold of her sunburn. Grown up and all, she was still a bit like a boy, and quite different.

"Those Germans," she said, standing up against the sky, legs apart, hands on her hips, "they're pigs. I can't make out why Mr. Uncle doesn't kill them and be done with it."

Davy and I laughed. She often made us laugh when she came out with things like that.

"But, Naomi," I said, "you can't just go and kill people—bong! bong!—like that."

"You can and you should," she said. "Bong! Bong! I would. Mr. Uncle should. He'll have to kill them in the end, when they've done any amount of harm. Be much

better to get in first. I'm surprised at Mr. Uncle being silly for once in his dear old life."

"Talking of killing people," said Davy, "we've been wondering whether we should go to this war and fight the Germans."

I expected Naomi to laugh at us, but she frowned and her brows crinkled up as if she had got a sudden toothache.

"That's stupid," she said, "it isn't our war. It's bad and the bad people out there made it. Mr. Uncle has turned us into good people. War isn't for us, never! never! never! Don't you ever say such a thing again, Davy Hawthorne, or I'll never speak to you. And if other silly boys are saying it, you're to stop them if you have to stop them by punching their noses. You're a lot of sillies. Anyway, they don't want boys in a war. They want real men, and there are enough men to fight their mad war, millions and millions and millions of them. We usen't to be lucky once, not any of us, except Uncle Erasmus, and, now we are lucky, we're going to stay that way." She turned on me suddenly with her brown fists clenched as if she was going to hit me. "And don't you listen to his nonsense either, Jeremy," she said fiercely. "What about your mother who isn't over having Ruth yet? You wouldn't go upsetting her with silly talk or even silly thinking, would you, Jeremy? Would you?"

"Why, no, Naomi," I said. "Of course I wouldn't. It was only just we were wondering."

"Then you'd better stop wondering and get the salt into the handcart," said Naomi.

We did as we were told, feeling foolish.

V

There was great bustle and activity over the preparations for Aunt Grace's marriage. Uncle Erasmus always liked such occasions—or indeed any occasions which served to break the routine of our lives—and he had decreed that this wedding should be the finest ever known on Quail Island. In doing this he was prompted not only by his regard for Aunt Grace.

I guessed his other motive. All the fuss served to take our minds off those Germans and their news.

Since my mother's marriage, Aunt Grace had lived with Naomi and Miss Titgens. They called their house The Nunnery, and they had been happy there as nuns always seem to be. Now she and Mr. Paterson were to have the house which had belonged to Mr and Mrs. Davenport until he was crushed by a falling pine and Mrs. Davenport just died quietly of a broken heart and followed her husband into God's Acre. It was a fine house, standing on a headland looking out to sea. Uncle Erasmus set us to work, cleaning and repainting and improving it and restoring the garden.

It was fun to be working for Aunt Grace and Mr. Paterson, and good to have special occupation.

The ladies were busy, too, getting their costumes ready for the great day. Miss Titgens was on the go from first light to dark. She was always a little, bustling, eager, helpful woman and now she declared she could have used a score of hands. The bride's dress was to be her masterpiece, and Naomi was to wear proper girl's clothes as bridesmaid. Poor Naomi, she did try to help, but Miss Titgens laughed at her, and said she sewed like Bob Martin, the shoemaker, only not so neatly.

The school was closed so that it could be properly decorated, and the breakfast was to be a real banquet. There was to be everything to eat from sucking pig to a wedding cake made by Miss McGregor. Uncle Erasmus still hoarded a little wine and whisky. He was to broach some of that hoard.

Oh, it was going to be a big day.

We almost forgot about the Germans.

I had just chanced along to The Nunnery that afternoon because after to-morrow Aunt Grace would be still Aunt Grace but also Mrs. Paterson which wouldn't be quite the same thing. I never thought they'd guess, but ladies are very quick. Aunt Grace knew, and so did that imp, Naomi. Even busy Miss Titgens seemed to know. I felt a fool, but everyone was nice to me, almost too nice, as if I were at the dentist's.

"Wait till you see Aunt Grace as a bride," Naomi whispered. "You'll be mad as a hornet you weren't born ten years sooner. You won't be able to take your eyes off her. If I could be bothered I'd put my frock on now and let you see it

because Miss Titgens has done it beautifully and you won't notice to-morrow."

"But I will, Naomi," I said. "Of course I will. I always notice you. And I'll bet Davy Hawthorne notices, too."

Naomi looked sly and said: "You bet he will. Davy's got eyes in his head and uses them."

I didn't say anything to that because it was natural that she should like Davy. I did myself, in lots of ways.

Then Aunt Grace came out of the inner room, dressed as she had been when she refused Uncle Erasmus, with silly little parasol and all.

"I feel like a breath of air," she said, "before it gets dark. May I take you away from Naomi just for a while, Jeremy, and have your company?"

"That would be grand, Aunt Grace," I said, "and Naomi will be all right, because here comes Davy Hawthorne."

"Hooray!" said Naomi, "but don't you ever tell him, Jeremy, I said hooray or I'll bite you."

She showed her little, sharp, bright teeth menacingly.

The Nunnery stood by the stream in which the *Quail* had come to rest, and a path had been cut along the bank. It was pleasant there in the late afternoon in the soft shadows of the pines with the silver water rushing down from the heart of the island to the sea. It chuckled and whispered through our talk, and the cows and sheep on the other bank raised their heads from feeding and stared at us with kind but empty eyes. Aunt Grace slipped her arm through mine, and we talked easily like the old friends we were. Our words drifted back through the years to the days when Mr. Bicycle, with the moustache, had come courting Aunt Grace, and those others, too, whom she had sent away.

"I suppose I seem to have been ages making up my mind," said Aunt Grace. "All the years while you were turning from a little tadpole of a boy into a great frog of a man—not that you were ever like a tadpole, Jeremy—or not much—or are like a frog now, if it comes to that, but you know what I mean. The change."

"I know, Aunt Grace," I said.

"And now, after all, I marry Mr. Paterson, the school-teacher, and think I'm the luckiest woman who ever lived. But that's the way it is, Jeremy, and there's no explaining.

There's just one right one for each of us, and sometimes we have to wait a long time, and sometimes we know them for a long time without realizing it, but there's just one. So I am lucky mine should be Mr. Paterson, for sometimes the one, though he is the one, is all wrong but we never know until it's too late, and we can't do anything about it, anyway."

"You know that Mr. Paterson isn't wrong, Aunt Grace," I said.

"Yes," she said softly, "I know. That's why I am lucky. I should never have met him but for Uncle Erasmus, bless the old inspired rum-swigger. Oh, Jeremy, how he'd have hated having to marry me!"

"It seems very funny to me, Aunt Grace," I said, "but it's true. I can't imagine any man feeling like that."

"You are a duck, Jeremy," Aunt Grace said, pressing my arm to her. "Quite the nicest duck. And I'm glad your future's all provided for."

"My future, Aunt Grace? How do you mean?"

She laughed, and her laughter ran with the laughter of the silver stream.

"Why, what could I mean, Jeremy?—except that I'm glad you're here on Quail Island, where there is a future, instead of out there in the world of war." But that wasn't all she had meant. She had made that up on the spur of the moment. Before I could say anything she was away to something else. "Which reminds me of the Germans."

"The Germans?"

"Let's go and call on them."

"Oh, no," I said, remembering, "not now. Not to-night. It's going to be bad enough to-morrow. They'll spoil everything."

"They won't," said Aunt Grace, twirling her silly little sunshade. "Come along, Jeremy. You may find this amusing."

So we turned off from the happy river, and went to the Greens' house, and there they were sitting on the Greens' only chairs on the verandah, talking together in their own language, gloating over all they knew. They were still as rude as ever to us contemptible yokels, but when Aunt Grace strolled up and paused, twirling her little silly sunshade, they both started to their feet, clicked their heels together and

bowed their cropped heads. Aunt Grace was as pretty as that.

But I hated them more than ever. They were taking off her clothes with their insolent, goggling eyes. Aunt Grace knew that, too, but she did not care about their wickedness.

"Madame," said Captain von Schomberg in his grand way, "may we offer our felicitations to the beautiful bride of to-morrow?"

Aunt Grace's tiny foot tapped.

"Since this is your sole opportunity, you may," said Aunt Grace. "Pray accept my token thanks for your token felicitations. You will understand, you, Captain von Schomberg, and you, Herr Holtz, that to-morrow is the most important day of my life. Nothing must spoil it—nothing! Such a ceremony is a very personal affair, and I have invited only personal friends—what one might call the local people. Is that clear?"

Captain von Schomberg frowned and his eyebrow bit down on his monocle.

"Do I understand, madame, that we are excluded then?" he said.

"You understand correctly," said Aunt Grace, cool and quiet. "People here have been over kind and patient with you. I am neither kind nor patient. If you so much as show your faces near my wedding I shall raise this little finger and a dozen better men will fling you out on your thick necks. In other words, and in case you have not understood, for you have wooden skulls, you Germans, I do not like you, and I do not want you at my wedding and I will not have you there. To-morrow you must not exist on Quail Island. I bid you good evening, Herr Captain, Herr Holtz. Come, Jeremy."

And whilst they still stood there, bolt upright, too shocked and indignant for speech, and hurt, too, because they would have liked to go to such a lovely lady's fine wedding, Aunt Grace turned on her heel and walked away with me beside her, trying not to grin, choking down a cheer.

Aunt Grace brushed them from her mind, and did not say another word about them, but as we walked back along the stream we talked of nice things, like the times when I

was small and she used to take me to the zoo and the museum and the moving pictures.

Where the path turned off towards The Nunnery she paused. The hour was quiet with the coming of evening. Only the stream chattered to itself as it slipped down to the sea.

"All the years, Jeremy, my dear," she said, looking up at me with her opal eyes that had flecks of gold in them, "no woman ever had a more faithful admirer. The others came and went, but there was always Jeremy."

She took both my arms above the elbows, and tilted back her head and smiled up at me, and somehow, just by the pressure of her small hands, drew me down to her, for, as I had always noticed, for a grown-up lady she was very little and dainty.

"Thank you for the years of loyalty and love, Jeremy," she said, "and with this I set you free."

She stood on tiptoe and kissed me on the mouth, and her lips were as I remembered them, warm and soft yet cool, like a dewy rose.

Then she turned quickly away and went back to her house, leaving me standing there dazed but happy, and astounded, too, to learn that all the time she had known I was in love with her, which I'd thought was a secret.

Next morning she became Mrs. Paterson at the grandest wedding ever held on Quail Island. The ladies cried to see such a lovely bride, and the men swore that Paterson had more luck than he deserved.

The Germans did not come and we forgot about them so completely that their absence did not even cause grateful comment.

Aunt Grace looked so perfect in the gown Miss Titgens' loving fingers had made that I could not take my eyes off her, even though I was free.

CHAPTER VIII

I

UNCLE ERASMUS was still wary of the sea, but occasionally when there was just enough breeze to make sure we should not be becalmed, and yet not enough—or the threat of enough—to stir up anything like real waves, he would come out in the boat to fish and think and look at the island from outside.

Usually he did so when he had things on his mind, and wanted to work them out. There was plenty on his mind the day after Aunt Grace's wedding—all the troubles the Germans had brought with them and turned loose among us, like a plague of wasps, but worse.

Often there would be half a dozen of us in the boat and the sport would be real and purposeful, for, in addition to the fun, fish played a big part in our diet. But to-day Uncle Erasmus and I were alone. He had wished it so.

The boat had only a small lug sail, and was easy to handle. I had become expert and loved sailing. The day was one after my uncle's heart, and we could not expect many more of them.

Light airs came out of the west, the sun shone in a cloudless sky and the blue of the sea dazzled the eyes. We slipped along so gently that had it not been for the faint gurgle of the water along the sides we should hardly have known we were moving. I was at the tiller, and Uncle Erasmus sprawled on the bottom grating, his vast body at ease, his back resting against a cushion wedged between it and a thwart. He puffed his pipe and considered Quail Island with veiled eyes. No need to ask whether he wanted us to fuss about with fishing lines and bait. No need to talk at all. We could be silent and happy together, Uncle Erasmus and I.

Yes, it was good now and again to get away on the broad plain of the sea, and look back at the island, quite remote from it, viewing it as a whole.

Once upon a time Lord Nelson had pouched his cheeks and wagged his head at the absence of any signs of man.

Now those signs abounded, though from out there they were dwarfed so that it was like looking at a child's toy island with houses made from match-boxes, and tiny pine trees which must stand on wooden bases, and paths scraped here and there with the end of a pencil, and Noah's Ark animals and people dotted about, and blue wool feathers of smoke rising from chimneys. The greens of the young orchards and the vegetable fields, the gold of the ripening crops and the red of the rocks, had been hand-painted with vivid primary colours from a sixpenny box. No sounds came out across the water and the toy island might have been shut away under a globe of blue glass.

It was fascinating to put names to the little people—to think that that figure might be Lord Nelson, or that one Naomi; to realize that Peter and Paul were the bullocks harnessed to the midget blue cart.

And the picture looked so peaceful and serene and quiet that it was horrible to remember it couldn't have been left as it was, instead of being mussed up by the coming of the strangers from the sea.

The hours slipped by, and soon it would be time for us to get back. I sat there wondering how I would fare in the sports on Deliverance Day, now near at hand, and I was glad my uncle had let us have the Patersons' wedding as a separate holiday.

Just then the thing happened.

"Uncle Erasmus!" I jerked out abruptly, and why I was so alarmed I could not tell but my alarm communicated to my uncle.

He sat up quickly and his hawk-glance followed the direction in which I pointed.

Away on the farther end of Quail Island was a bold headland which fell down sharply to the sea. Its top had been cleared of pines and ran in a ruled line across the sky. The trees on the slopes below would hide it from the people ashore, but with our longer angle of vision it stood out clear and sharp.

A man no bigger than a flea, and looking very like one, moved slowly, silhouetted against the fierce, clear blue. He made me think of a Flea Circus I had seen at a fair, and like one of those performers he dragged something heavy

after him, steadily and stolidly as if knowing that the task had to be done.

Now there was nothing very startling in that—he might have been dragging a sack or a piece of timber—and yet the effect was startling.

We spied on him from far away, unthought of, unguessed, just a brown leaf floating on the waters.

The flea of a man reached the edge of the cliff, and there he tugged at whatever his burden was, and suddenly he had sent it over into the air and whatever it was went twisting and turning down to fall into the deep water at the foot, making the hint of a splash.

Perhaps he was only dumping rubbish.

We could not know from so far away.

Then the flea of a man hopped about with most unhuman movements and went hopping back along the thin black wire of the crest until the trees hid him from sight.

"Strange," said Uncle Erasmus, "and yet why is it so strange, Ancient?"

I only knew it was strange, too, and had no other answer.

And whilst we watched, undecided and puzzled, the patient flea re-appeared, no longer hurrying but toiling once more at the task, towing another burden, still fastened to the black thread of wire against the blue.

Again he reached the edge, and again he rid himself of his heavy load and it went hurtling down into the sea, but now he did not skip away jerkily, but stood there a long time, his microscopic head and body bowed forward, watching the waves where they slapped up in a brief lace of foam far below.

"Ancient," said my uncle, "how long would it take us to sail to that point?"

"Hours, Uncle Erasmus, sir," I said, "with this bit of a breeze, and it would be dark long before we got half-way."

"I feared as much," said my uncle. "Then bring us back to the beach as quickly as you can, and we must go afoot, for something is amiss up there, Ancient, and I like it not."

"Nor me, Uncle Erasmus, sir," I said. "Nor me."

The sun sent long, warm, slanting rays out of the west, but gooseflesh crept coldly on my skin. I couldn't have told why.

With the approach of night the breeze blew a little harder,

but we were far out and seemed to crawl. We might have been trailing an anchor over the sandy bottom.

The spot of man up there, the flea, turned away presently, and went jerkily back into the woods and we saw him no more.

We dared not speak the name that might be his, and we dared not guess aloud what he had been about.

The clumsy, stupid boat crawled on and the gulls came out through the dying day to greet us.

II

The night had come by the time we reached the buoy at the mouth of the creek below the hull of the *Quail*, and I had made the boat fast. As I splashed through the shallows after Uncle Erasmus a round white harvest moon came climbing out of the sea and warmed the dark waters.

While we pulled on our sandals my uncle said: "This is a private matter between us for the present, Ancient, but we shall be passing your home, and you can pause there a moment to report that we are back and you are going on an errand with me. We cannot afford to have a nursing mother upset by unnecessary fears. There is nothing like mother's milk, boy, for burly babies."

In many of the cabins the people were already abed, but when we reached our house my mother and Dad Barnaby were sitting on the verandah watching the moonrise. My mother had given Ruth her evening meal, and I knew the baby was asleep in her cot with her little fists clenched against her face. Now my mother took her ease in the fine rocking-chair which Petersen had made in his carpentry shop. Dad Barnaby and she were holding hands, and he leaned over a little so that her head rested against his shoulder. They looked like sweethearts, instead of a couple who'd been married three years and had a baby and two almost grown-up sons.

Uncle Erasmus stood in the background, and I told them quickly that we had a job to do and I might be back late. They were curious, naturally, and yet were tactful and wise

and didn't ask any questions. They were always like that. It was one of the biggest reasons why I loved them both. My mother was still supposed to be taking things quietly, but she was gone like a flash and back in the instant. She handed me a big, cold mutton chop and a slab of our good home-made bread. No wrapping, nothing else. She knew our business was urgent.

"Good for you, Mary," said Dad Barnaby. "A lad who's been afloat all the afternoon doesn't work well on an empty stomach."

"Thanks, mom," I said.

"Bless you, Jeremy."

And I was back with my uncle.

"A good couple," he said. "Honour them always, Ancient. And now, come."

He strode away following the course of the stream up into the heart of the island, and I had almost to trot to keep pace with his great strides which carried him over the ground like a giant in a fairy tale. Though we went on a puzzling and weird mission the world through which we moved was sheer beauty. The pines which Jonathan had seen as Christmas trees that first Deliverance Day were the real thing now. The big moon coated their dark boughs with the bright whiteness of snow, and the fields lay under snow, and the stream sparkled as if it carried ice along with it.

For all our haste and the perfection of the night I contrived to gnaw my chop and munch my bread. I was so hungry I could have eaten an ox, and I blessed my mother.

We knew every inch of our island, and though neither of us had mentioned it, we knew our destination, also. Presently we left the stream and climbed more sharply, following a winding footpath. I flung away the chopbone—a dog could not have gnawed it cleaner—and devoted myself to keeping up with Uncle Erasmus, whose iron muscles did not notice hills.

I, young and an athlete of repute, was puffing when we reached the top, and came out into the milky brilliance of the clearing, but Uncle Erasmus had not turned a hair. Perhaps some of my shortness of breath was due to excitement, and fear.

There, in the middle of the clearing, was the place we were going to with never a word said of it between us.

Jim Pearce's cabin looked like a chalet in a picture of Switzerland, its shingled roof glittering and white. There was a great quiet, broken only by the sigh of the pines in the breeze which blew up there on that height even on the stillest night.

Jim Pearce was sitting by himself on the top step of his house with his head held on either side in his hands, as if it ached. He was looking down between his knees at the step. The black cat Darkie sat beside him as he had sat beside Miss Jessie Hawthorne once upon a time. Darkie was old and shaggy now, like a worn rug, but his eyes glowed round and bright, and green as emeralds.

Uncle Erasmus paused and watched the quiet house and the quiet man and the quiet cat, and a sad, great sigh came out of him and mingled with the sighing of the pines.

"Come, Ancient," he said quietly, "it is all part of the task. Come, boy."

And I followed him across the clearing, our feet making no noise on the soft ground so that it seemed more than ever as if snow had fallen on Quail Island—an unheard-of event.

But there were other events which had never happened before on Quail Island, and we were to hear of them now.

I thought Darkie would slink away. He sat there, watching, listening.

"Jim," said Uncle Erasmus.

The bent man straightened up, gripping a knee with each hand. His face was as still and empty as the moon's, but his eyes burned holes in its whiteness.

"So you've come, Mr. Quail?" he said flatly.

"I've come, Jim."

"I knew you would, though God knows why I should expect it. You're like that on this island of yours. You know without seeing. I should never have come back to this island of yours, Mr. Quail."

"You did, Jim."

"I did, God help me, Mr. Quail."

I could have told him that he had had to come back. It was not for me to intrude. Perhaps he didn't need telling, for he went on: "It seemed as if I didn't have any choice, Mr. Quail. I did try to go away. I took her arms from

round me neck and I went. You saw with your own eyes, Mr. Quail, and you saw what followed."

"I did."

"I tried never to let on to her how unhappy I was here, Mr. Quail, like a prisoner in jail. Since it had to be, I wanted to make the best of a bad job. Jess knew a lot of things in her own way. She wasn't just the prettiest girl ever, as she seemed on the surface. She was clever in a secret kind of way—like—like a cat is. Like this cat here." He didn't look at the cat or make any motion towards it. He just felt Darkie sitting at his side, watching, listening. "It was like a shadow on us, me hating it here, in jail, and Jess knowing all the time. Yet I tried to keep it from her, because I loved her in me own way, even if it wasn't the way she wanted. She wanted every bit, Jess did, and my secret made her feel she wasn't getting it."

"You seemed a happy pair," said Uncle Erasmus.

"We almost were, Mr. Quail, and yet we weren't, if you take my meaning. Like lots of married people we kept up appearances and rubbed along, but it wasn't right deep down. Oh, it's hard to explain. You're clever, Mr. Quail. I'm only a simple cove."

"No need to explain, Jim. I understand. And——?"

"I'm sorry for letting you down, Mr. Quail, and making such a mess here where you've tried to keep everything clean and fine and proper. I didn't ought to have done it. I know that now; I see that. But not at the time. I couldn't see anything not at the time, but just them like that. You wouldn't have done it, Mr. Quail. You'd have thought of something better and cleverer. You'd have had the right words, or the right thought, and you'd have saved all the mess. But me, as I say, I'm just a simple cove, and I loved her more'n she ever knew, more'n I ever knew, but in me own way."

He sat a while thinking of his love.

"It was finding them like that, here in me own house where we'd taken him in and nursed him back to life. He was nothing to us. He didn't ought ever have come here, not by rights. I suppose, comes to that, if we'd ever had kids he wouldn't have been sent up here even when he did come. But there it is: there weren't never kids. So it all fits in

like the bits in two cog wheels, Mr. Quail, if you follow me, and here we are."

"You found them together this afternoon?"

"Like that," said Jim Pearce. "He had the name of a girl called Gretel tattooed on his arm with a heart and arrow and all. Why couldn't he stick to Gretel? I didn't want his Gretel. Why should he take my Jess? I'd been out cutting timber for a post and rail fence for the new potato patch. Though I didn't like it here, for her sake I was always anxious to be improving the place. Like you wanted us to, Mr. Quail. I wasn't bad that way."

"You weren't, Jim," said Uncle Erasmus. "You were a good worker."

"No matter now," Jim Pearce went on as if he didn't know he was speaking. "I knocked off for a spell, for it was hot in the woods, and found I'd left me pipe back here. So I came home to get it, and I found 'em like that, with Gretel on his bare arm. I had my axe on my shoulder, and that's another of the cogs in the wheel, for the sensible thing would have been to have left it behind. But there you are, without thinking, I had my axe on my shoulder. As God's me witness, Mr. Quail, I couldn't tell you what happened then. I haven't the brains or the understanding. Everything was red and black and muddled. I hadn't meant to do it—I hadn't ever thought I would ha' had to do it—but there it was, Mr. Quail, when I could see again and begin to think again they were dead. It was merciful quick, Mr. Quail, all over in a couple of flashes of the axe, Mr. Quail, but there it was done and nothing could ever undo it again. You see me calm, now, Mr. Quail—so calm that maybe you would be right to think I'm not sound in the head any more, but then I wasn't calm. I had to get rid of them. I felt as that if I could only get rid of them it would never ha' happened, and I'd go back with my pipe and finish cutting the timber. And so——"

"You needn't tell me the rest, Jim," said Uncle Erasmus, and his voice held nothing of reproach or horror or anger. He was merely saving the poor man trouble.

Jim Pearce had sat motionless all the time, like an Egyptian statue in a picture, his hands on his knees. There was no blood on his hands, no trace about him of what he had done.

Only for the utter blankness of his face he would have been just Jim Pearce, the sailor, whom we all knew.

"It's an awful pity it had to happen, Mr. Quail. An awful pity."

"Yes, Jim, an awful pity."

"You've always been a great one for justice and order and God and all o' that, Mr. Quail, and rightly. I've admired you for it; we all have. So that's why it's a pity it had to happen. It makes such a mess of Quail Island. And yet, in a way, I didn't do it. It was that German, that Holtz, Gretel's sailor. Oh, don't think I'm trying to shift the blame or get out of anything. I'm not, Mr. Quail. You know me better than that."

"I do, Jim."

"But there's a bit of sense in what I say, Mr. Quail, you do agree?"

"I do, Jim. Indeed, I do."

"Good to hear you say that, Mr. Quail. What happens to me doesn't matter any more, but it's nice to feel easier inside about it all. But nothing can change that I've brought a lot of trouble to you who's never done harm to anyone. For now you'll have to have the thing you never wanted nor thought to have on Quail Island. You'll have to have a hanging on Quail Island. Murder's a hanging matter, Mr. Quail, and I've gone and done two."

The mere fact that he said it so calmly made it worse. Cold prickles ran over my scalp. It was, I suppose, what people call their hair standing on end.

Uncle Erasmus had been thinking all the time. He did not keep Jim Pearce in suspense. He had judged him while he listened, and he did not remand poor Jim for sentence, or put on a black cap, or order him away to the condemned cell, or do any of the things they did back in the world.

"Jim," he said, "you are guilty of murder, and there's no getting away from that. We shan't try to. The German, Holtz, though he has paid the penalty, is also guilty. Your axe would have only had pine resin on it at this moment if it hadn't been for him, and if it hadn't been for Jessie. We need not bother with their guilt. Hating them won't help. I don't want to have a hanging on Quail Island. In a way that's weak of me, for I swore to be as ruthless as

an Old Testament prophet should the Serpent enter Eden. But you are a sinner much sinned against, Jim. I would not hang you, Jim."

He paused a moment, not to prolong the poor sailorman's agony, but seeking confirmation of his guidance. I knew that attitude so well—the big head flung back so that the beard jutted out, the eyes looking up, the complete absorption in what he was doing so that he had forgotten we existed.

Jim Pearce did not bother to look. He was a simple chap, as he said, but he knew what Uncle Erasmus was doing—perhaps because he was simple.

"Yes," said Uncle Erasmus, having had his answer, "that is the solution. You have a bright moon and everybody save us is long abed. Waste no more time here. Take this key." He drew it from the deep pocket of his trousers, and it glittered. "It will admit you to the after cabin of the *Quail*. Leave the key in the door. It's of no consequence. We are honest people here. Help yourself to all the provisions you need. There are plenty of containers for water. Fill them at the creek. Take our boat, and go."

"You mean you don't have to hang me, Mr. Quail?"

"I mean just that, Jim."

Jim Pearce suddenly started to his feet, and held out his hand for the key. It was startling, like seeing a corpse come back to life.

"I'm glad," he said, "glad for all our sakes. But can you spare the boat, Mr. Quail?"

"You forget, we have the Germans. They took our boat as much as you. We shall have theirs in exchange. But you have no time to waste. I'm sorry, Jim, that you must go like this, but there is no other way. Go now before us. Run. If it is God's will you will be saved, and if you are you will have done penance meanwhile, so have a clear conscience. Perhaps this time the Lord will be kinder in the matter of a wind to fill your sail."

And even as Uncle Erasmus spoke the breeze that always blew up there grew stronger and set the pines swaying and nodding though they could not shake off their burden of snow.

"God bless you, Mr. Quail," said Jim Pearce, and the chains which had bound him there to the steps of his empty

house fell from him, and he went sprinting away across the clearing, like a boy who runs off from school.

Uncle Erasmus stood apart a while, his head bent, and I waited silent and full of love for him, because he was the greatest man in the world.

"Come, Ancient," he said. "We have done well."

We turned our backs on the empty house, leaving the ragged, emerald-eyed cat still crouched on the verandah.

We did not speak again until we reached my home.

"Do not disturb your mother, boy," Uncle Erasmus said. "Rest is vital to her. Speak of this to no one. Let us see what the day brings. And do not trouble your young head, or marvel greatly that you would not go to their wedding. A child's guess may be as good as Napoleon's, and his, or her, instinct is likely to be much better. So sleep sound, Ancient, and do not concern yourself with riddles that have no answers. To-morrow is a fresh day, and it is to-morrow which is a wise man's concern. Good night, then, my Ancient."

Uncle Erasmus knew everything, even that my head was spinning with this sad, strange ending to Miss Jessie Hawthorne's witching.

III

Though I usually slept like a log, and crept to bed that night much later than usual and tired out with sorrow and horror and pity, I could not obey Uncle Erasmus and sleep well. I had dreams of falling over cliffs, and Darkie chased me down long aisles of pines when it was most important that I should cut posts and rails for the new potato patch.

Dawn was still coming up the shoulder of the globe when I could stand it no longer, and moving quietly so as not to disturb Jonathan who slept in my room, or the rest of the house, I put on my clothes and went out. The moon was dropping down. The first thing I noticed was the wind which ran merrily through the empty night—a wind out of the east for which Lord Nelson and Jim Pearce and the others had prayed in vain. It blew the cobwebs of nightmares from my mind, and made me happy. I said a prayer of thanks which hadn't any words at all.

In the quiet house behind me I could hear Dad Barnaby snoring gently, a man whose very sleep was happy. They would not be astir just yet. With nothing better to do I felt drawn towards the beach. Perhaps—far, far out—I should see the boat running steadily before the breeze.

But when I came out from the trees I stopped dead on the edge of the sand.

Both the boats were still there, and yet, unless my dreams had muddled me and I had been abed a much shorter time than I imagined, a man who had committed two murders and been given a chance would have been away ages before.

I remembered how Jim Pearce had sprinted across the clearing.

No sign of him. The boat was as I had left her overnight. Puzzled and surprised I walked down the beach. Just below high-water mark I came on Jim Pearce's shirt with the key lying on it. The key was all caked with sand for he had used it to write a message.

In the strange twilight of the fading moon and the coming day I read what he had written on the firm, white beach, on which there was not even the pronged marks of gulls' feet. The crooked letters read:

"TA MR. Q. BUT BETTER SWIM."

Footprints went in a straight line to the bubbling foam of the waves.

I think I grew up a lot while I stood thinking about the sailor, Jim Pearce.

Of course, he could never have sailed with any breeze away from himself and his memories and his conscience. Had he been saved he would still have been lost. Better far to swim out in the quiet silver sea—out and out and out—until he was tired and rested and all was ended.

There was still my duty to do as my uncle's Ancient.

I went to his house, knowing he would be up, for no day was long enough for him. And as I drew near I heard him singing in the shed where he had his shower-bath. He could never help singing when he had his cold shower. He was singing "Old Black Joe." He stepped out on to the grass, wrapping a towel about him, and in the half-light, streaming with water.

I made my report to him.

He listened, rubbing his big, clean body.

When I had done he considered for a space.

"Jim said he was a simple cove," said Uncle Erasmus. "Perhaps he was very wise. He knows now. Do not trouble your gentle young heart, boy, Ancient. I think the answer he has had is as we would wish it."

IV

Naturally I didn't want a haircut just after Aunt Grace's wedding. I had been smart for that. But my mind full of the happenings, and thinking of Captain von Schomberg asleep, I had to go to Mr. Green's house straight after my huge breakfast. Back in Sydney it would have been different. On Quail Island we didn't have to pay. Mr. Green was a tall, bent man with a slick of black hair plastered over his bald skull. As a general thing he was silent and a bit morose, but when he had you in the fine barber's chair which Petersen had made for him he would chatter ninety to the dozen.

Mr. Green pretended, too, about my hair needing a trim for Deliverance Day, because he was glad enough of a gossip so early in the morning. His parlour was a hut at the back of the house, and he was happier there than anywhere else. He had a good wife, who looked after him very well, but really all his interest centred on the Parlour and his customers. His proudest times, even in the Promised Land, were when Uncle Erasmus came to have his hair and beard trimmed just as he used to in the little shop down in the back street near the builders' yard when the schooner was being refitted. My uncle had given the tall, bent man a sovereign each time, and had brought him away with us because he was a good barber. Uncle Erasmus didn't want us to be a lot of cranks with hair to our shoulders.

We chattered about the preparations for Deliverance Day—the sports, the ox to be roasted whole and all the fun. But that wasn't what I was there for, though as yet I didn't know my real reason for being at the Greens' house.

"Is Jonathan still hanging about, Mr. Green?" I asked,

not that I cared really because Jonathan was still only a kid, and small for his years, and it was natural that he should be interested in anything so strange as Captain von Schomberg. I might have been myself at his age.

"Can't get rid of him. Can't," said Mr. Green. "Every moment he's not in school he's round the place. I believe the only two things that interest him are the hunting-knife your uncle give him for his birthday, and that German. Follows the swine round, in and out the house, dotes on him. Like a love-struck girl, but worse. I can't make it out, Jeremy, for you would think with what he's seen here he'd know that this idol of his has feet of clay. Clay, Jeremy—dirty clay. But there it is. Can't account for nippers. I imagine the idea that he's a captain in the navy who's been to the wars—I imagine that fascinates young Jonathan. Fascinates him. Funny, all the same. Funny."

"Very," I agreed, "but I suppose he'll get over it."

That wasn't my real business either.

"I hope so," said Mr. Green. "Hope so. Making a swine like that think anybody takes any interest in him except the like of me and Mercia that have your uncle's orders. All the same, young Jonathan's in for a shock this morning. He's going to find that his famous fighting strong man is human like the rest of us. Human."

When he said that I knew it was why I was there.

"How do you mean, Mr. Green?"

"Why, not fifteen minutes ago the superman, the great Lord Tomnoddy, was yowling like a baby in his room, and I had to rush in, and there he was on the edge of his bed with his stiff, haughty back bent double and unable to move an inch either way and his face all twisted. You would have thought he was good as dead. Dead. So did he. But I'd seen my own Daddie taken that way, and I knew, but I didn't let on. Not me. It gives me too much joy. Joy. He thought it was finish for him. I didn't tell him it was just lumbago. Lumbago. Not after what we been through at his hands in this house. And his pal, too. Not me. No. I put him back into bed as roughly as I could—fumbling, you know, in my anxiety—and, since it's your uncle's orders, the missus is up now calling the Doc, your father, but telling him not to rush himself. Oh, you would have had a chuckle,

Jeremy, to see me helping that big cry-baby back to bed, knowing what it was and just what would hurt him."

He was going snip-snip in a casual way, to keep up the pretence that I was a customer, but I saw that this was news Uncle Erasmus should hear, and news that would suit him well, so I asked Mr. Green if he was trying to make me look like one of the convicts Captain von Schomberg talked about, and jumped out of his fine chair. Mr. Green was disappointed to see a customer go, but, he knew, too, that he had told the customer a real bit of gossip and so he was happy.

"Thanks, Mr. Green," I said, and took off the white linen sheet he was so proud of, and ran all the way to my uncle's house.

He was eating the eggs and bacon which Miss McGregor had served crisp and piping hot. I panted out my tidings, and what a bit of luck this seemed, in view of what we knew.

"One of these days, Ancient," said Uncle Erasmus, "you will cease to talk of luck, and come to a simple Faith like mine. There's time enough, but you are learning. This is Providential. Nothing could be better. Go, boy, getting what help you need, and pass my word to every adult. They are to gather here in front of my house twenty minutes after every child is in school. The children are to know nothing. Send Mr. Paterson to me first of all. He must know, and can tell his lady. Do not bother the Hawthornes. I have seen them. They are fortunate in not being a closely-knit family. Jessie was remote from them. And Mrs. Green—she is to stay mum with her patient. And your mother's place is with Ruth. But gather the rest. Truly this is a mercy. Go, Ancient, be busy as never before."

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, wondering what he had decided, but much happier inside.

v

The children were in school, as they would have been on any other morning, Mr. Paterson and his wife in charge of them. When the adults gathered outside my uncle's house we found him sitting in his chair on the edge of the big room

looking grave but serene and not unhappy, and he told us in simple words—Jim Pearce's words almost—of the happenings of the night. Most of the ladies cried, hearing him, and some of the men swore, and everyone was shocked and horrified. Faces were white and sad and grim in the happy morning sunlight.

"Yes," said my uncle when he had done, "it is all the things you are thinking—a tragedy which belongs quite outside our peaceful world, and there is no comfort I can give you, save only that Jim Pearce has escaped from a place where he was not at home, and has gone, I am sure in my deepest heart, to the last haven where even sailors come to rest. Not all our tears, not all our regrets, can change a line of it. Good people, we must turn the page."

Even while he spoke so solemnly there had been a kind of scuffling and nudging among the men, and now, against his will, Lord Nelson was thrust forward, red and yet resolute. The dragons on his hands stirred as he twirled his invisible cap.

"Your pardon, Mr. Quail, sir," he said, "but ever since you made me an officer they pick on me. And, mind, this time, though I haven't had a chance to be told, I think I know what they want me to say. This is the way I see it, sir, Mr. Quail, and I'm all too ready to stand corrected by anyone here if I am adrift. The Germans killed Mr. and Mrs. Hawthorne, poor souls. I don't care what Jim did, it was that German. Now the captain's no better than Holtz. I'll bet he knew."

Mr. Green stepped forward, the first time he had ever done so on any public occasion.

"I can bear witness to that, sir," he said. "Witness. I used to get a bit of trade from German sailors down at the docks, and I picked up a word or so. Not to speak. Speak. But a word or two. Word. And when they were sitting on my verandah laughing and yabbering together I heard words which I know now I should have reported to you, sir. But at the time I didn't follow properly, and I thought my little bit of knowledge was probably leading me astray. Astray. It didn't occur to me ever, that such things could happen on Quail Island. But now I hear what you've told us, sir, I know that's what they were laughing about, as sure as my name's Green. Green."

He suddenly realized that he was not trimming my uncle's beard, and dropped back abashed.

"Ah, there's my very point, Mr. Quail, sir," said Lord Nelson. "Proper nasty. And unless I misunderstand what these people here who push me forward want me to say it's this, Mr. Quail, sir: We got to get rid of this other one quick. None of us are safe, nothing of all we've done and got here is safe while that German's still with us. If I didn't feel so strongly, Mr. Quail, sir, I wouldn't dare mention it, but there was a time when I was made spokesman and I begged you to string 'em up—I offered to go hangman, Mr. Quail, sir—and if we'd only done so then, Mr. Quail, sir, none of this would have happened, and Jim and Jessie would still be with us, though I hate speaking such words to you of all men."

"You were right, Lord Nelson, and you are right now," said Uncle Erasmus. "I have failed myself. I said I would be merciless. And yet, and yet, the quality of mercy——! Have no further fears." And though he was just sitting in his chair chatting as if we were discussing the weather we knew there would be no more mercy at the expense of Quail Island. "There is one point which is of more immediate concern. The children. This makes a scar on our clean history. It would please me very much to save them knowing what is written on the turned page."

None of us had a word to say. How could they be saved from knowing? Uncle Erasmus went away into himself, and we stayed below, puzzled and sad.

A shout made us jump. It came from Tim Murphy who was pointing with the whole of his long body, from his toes to the tip of his finger.

"B' Blessed Mary and all the angels and saints," he cried, "if it wasn't flaming, flaring blasphemy, praise God for another miracle. See, the house is afire, the Pearces' house is burning. Man alive, look for yourself. Up she goes, as red as hell and as black as ould Nick, and there's that pore Jim and Jessie and the wretched German foreigner all trapped and consumed and burnt up to a cinder, but it was all over before they knew it was happening. Ah, 'tis a dreadful story to tell to young ears, but 'tis better than some. Aren't you the lucky one, Erasmus Quail, to have the great God always

on your side, and you with no more proper religion than a pig in a sty!"

Nobody minded the wicked, rude things he said. We were all so happy that in the minds of the children poor Jim and poor Jessie, yes, and even that German, should just be burned to death by accident.

Uncle Erasmus gave a wink that was so great and happy and knowing that it said everything we wanted to say and more than any words could have done.

"It will be a sharp lesson to the youngsters," he said, "to be careful of fire. A tragic lesson, perhaps, but there are our precious pines and our precious homes to think of. Now to your work, and I shall go in due time and explain to them." He beckoned me to him as the meeting dispersed, and said, eyes very knowing: "Did you not tell Naomi, Ancient? I didn't see her here."

"I told Miss Titgens, Uncle Erasmus."

"I see," said my uncle. "Perhaps Miss Titgens forgot to mention it. Or do you think Naomi was too busy tidying up in her own crisp and decisive fashion?"

He dismissed me with a chuckle.

VI

On an ordinary day I should have gone to join Petersen in his carpentry shop, but this was an extraordinary day, and I knew that the Swede would be too happy among his sweet wood to notice that I wasn't there. People were like that on Quail Island. Craftsmen, men of muscle, farmers, the ladies—one and all went about their occupations with zest because they knew that others were making sure they in their turn had what they needed. There was no wealth, and no fear of want. Anyone who didn't work would have gone mad from boredom. Thus it was that there was somebody to do every job—humble or difficult—and men and women did their tasks to the best of their ability, without grudging, without misgiving, without the urge to be doing something else. And, if there were a real urge to be doing something else, then that was easily satisfied, because when no one was paid at all then all worked for fun.

That is why I say again Uncle Erasmus was the greatest man in the world, but then, as he had admitted from the first, he worked on a small canvas within the narrow scope of humans. America and Australia and countries like that were on a scale too heroic for little feeble man.

No sawing, no planing, no dovetailing with the clean white wood for me just then, though I loved it. Instead, with my uncle's chuckles in my ears, I took the path along the stream. The morning had mellowed into a kind autumn day, soft and gentle. There was nothing sad in autumn for us—no good-bye, summer, as in the song, no swallows making ready to fly. It was merely a placid harvest-time, and by golly! next week, after the big holiday, we would start on the real harvesting, and that would mean plenty of work for everyone, no matter what their usual trades might be.

And as I walked by the stream where I had strolled with Aunt Grace, where I had hurried after striding Uncle Erasmus, I knew just what had happened about Naomi.

It was Davy Hawthorne. As soon as my uncle had told them, Davy had raced round to Naomi, not because he really cared about his sister—any more than when she'd started her witching—but because it was a big and startling piece of news.

I couldn't blame him. And yet, somehow, I couldn't like him doing it. He only had half the story. She and I had it all.

But there it was. I hadn't had the chance to go to her, being on duty as Ancient to Uncle Erasmus. Perhaps it was as well. Naomi had simply gone ahead, acting on instinct, and the kids wouldn't ever know, and presently even the grown-ups would begin to believe the white lie because the truth had been so wretched and ugly.

At the point where the path branched off from the stream and the climb began, I looked up and saw Naomi between the blue-grey pillars of the pines, all speckled and spangled with sunlight.

She was striding down the hill on her lithe, brown legs, her body and head flung back against the descent, her small sandalled feet falling neatly in the path. She moved so easily, like a Red Indian.

In her boy's clothes, which remained so emphatically girl's

clothes, she was as Joan of Arc must have been, and I understood a lot of things I never had before in that story—how Joan was able to lead the French to beat us British, and how she managed the soldiers and the King and all, and what an awful thing it was the way she had been killed.

That was the way Naomi was.

I was so busy watching her in this friendly, general fashion that she was quite close before I realized the details.

Only then I saw that her dear freckled face and her dear brown, firm arms, were torn and bloody, and that her clothes were all stained and she carried some small thing against her chest.

"Naomi!" I cried in such horror that the sound of my own voice frightened me.

I rushed to meet her.

She paused, and smiled, eyes shining.

"Hullo, Jeremy," she said, as if we'd just met by chance as we did so often.

"Naomi—I—what——?" I couldn't get proper words out—not seeing her there, hurt and bleeding.

A small laugh popped out of her.

"Why, Jeremy," she said, and for the very first time in all the years she sounded breathless, "why, anyone would think—why anyone would think you—would think I was a ghost!"

I seized her bare arms. They were firm and cool, yet warm. "But, Naomi," I said, "the blood—you're—you're——!"

She went quite limp, as if I hurt her.

"Here——!" she said, abruptly.

She was carrying in her cupped hands one of the little brown hens. It had been hurt, too, but its round, black eyes were not afraid. She put it into my hands and though that frightened it I made my hands gentle and welcoming, because Naomi had given the little brown hen to me for some special reason. There was a log by the path, and Naomi sat down plomp! on it as if her strong legs had given away.

"Oh, crikey," she said to herself, "I knew, of course. I always knew. But I didn't know how much. Oh, crickey!"

It was as if the little girl in the sugar sack had spoken. I couldn't make head or tail of it—this new Naomi who

was so much the old Naomi of the schooner. A big pool of sunlight struck down on the log where she sat. What with all the excitement I was in a daze, and I could only look and look and look at her, and hold the little brown hen.

"What didn't you know, Naomi?"

"Oh, Jeremy, you chump," she said, "I didn't know how tired I was, of course. I've had a busy morning. Sit down, Jeremy." She patted the log beside her. "Sit down. Be careful of our little hen."

"Why, yes," I said. "Of course. Stupid of me. You must have run like the devil as soon as Davy told you."

"How did you know he told me?"

"I guessed, and I guessed it was you who'd done it."

She smoothed out her pants and patted her hair.

"There's that," she said. "Eventually we'll always know. I did right, didn't I?"

"Of course."

"We're getting lazy on this island," said Naomi, all at once herself again, wise and cool and steady. "Somebody else might have gone to live in that house because it was ready built and the ground laid out. But you can't get rid of a witch, just by killing. You've got to burn her out. Fire's the only thing. So I set fire to the witch's house, and a good thing, too."

"A good thing, too," I said, but I had to add: "Poor Miss Jessie Hawthorne."

"Poor nothing," said Naomi, setting her jaw. "Good riddance to bad rubbish. How do we know, Jeremy, that she didn't bring those Germans here with more of her witching?"

"But, Naomi——!" I had never thought of that, and never would have.

"Up there on her hill without me to keep an eye on her! I should have broken her neck instead of her leg. You didn't know Jim Pearce much, Jeremy. He was one of the nicest, kindest men who ever lived. He saw me hide in the hold that night, and he turned his back and he never said a word. He looked just once at me, and knew I had to come with Mr. Uncle. If he'd been anyone else he'd have told the police and they'd have taken me back to my mother. But he didn't. And he never said a word about it ever again, not to anyone, not even to me. He was a good man

like that, Jeremy, and now he's dead in the sea because I didn't break her neck."

"After all, you did break her leg, Naomi," I reasoned. "That was more than most people would have done, or had the sense to do."

"It wasn't enough," said Naomi. "But no matter. He's quit of her, and happy. I know that. Mr Uncle's God will have arranged things."

It put me in a queer whirl to see my grown-up Naomi and my little Namy all blended together. I looked at her, puzzled, and saw again the marks and the blood.

"But, Naomi," I said, "what hurt you? You're all hurt."

"Oh, pooh," she said, "that's nothing. Darkie came back when he knew I was burning his witch out of Quail Island. He had the little brown hen in his mouth. He was cross. That's all."

"You mean he scratched you?"

"I didn't scratch myself to give you a shock. I took the little hen from him, anyway, and we've got to nurse her back to life."

"Darkie!" I said, furious. "You wait till I get my hands on dear Darkie!"

I meant to impress her with how upset I was, but Naomi laughed.

"You'll need to be a good diver, for Darkie's at the bottom of the sea. It was a bit of a fight, but I got him in an old bag with a lump of rock in it, and I threw him off the top of the cliff after his mistress, and that's the end of the witch's cat, too."

As often happened on Quail Island, where we had to have cats, wild cats, to keep down the rats, a big white cat crossed the path followed by a tumble of black-and-white kittens.

"Don't worry, Jeremy," said Naomi. "Perhaps they are Darkie's children, but it doesn't work with cats once the witch has gone. We're good as finished with all that. Or nearly." And her face saddened. "I hope," she added.

I wanted to ask how she knew about witches and witching and cats and such, for it wasn't a thing we heard about, or worried about, in Australia, but I don't believe she could have told me. Naomi knew things just because she knew

them. She wasn't clever or educated or anything like that. She was just Naomi.

"Aren't I a fool, Jeremy," she said, laughing at herself. "Here I have you thinking about broomsticks and books you've read and witching and all the silliness, and if I'd only used my brains I could have——"

She broke off.

"You could have what?"

"Oh, hush your silly questions," she said, as if she were my grandma and I a mere baby, when all the time she was only little Naomi and I could have picked her up and sat her on my lap as my mother nursed Ruth and hardly known she was there at all, except that it was lovely holding her. "Oh, hush," she said, "haven't you eyes in your head for anything except me? Look, here's good old Davy. We must be sweet to him. He's lost his sister, and it's not the poor fellow's fault she was a witch and he didn't know or care."

Well, it certainly was surprising that there was Davy Hawthorne almost on top of us and I didn't know he was on the face of the earth. He came striding up, very handsome and big and sure, while I sat there nursing the hen and feeling a bit silly.

"Lo, Naomi," he said, "well, I never thought you'd run off and burn the blinking house down. Whatever made you do that?—because you're no fool, Naomi, and I know it."

The way he looked at her with his cheeky, dark eyes showed that.

"No matter, Davy dear," said Naomi. "I just felt like doing it."

"You're a smart one," Davy said, looking that he meant it. "I wish I knew what went on in your head."

"No matter," said Naomi, smiling her wide smile at him. "Only why was I so clever?"

"Because Mr. Quail's as pleased as the dickens." And, pushing his hands in his pockets and beaming, he told her all about how glad Uncle Erasmus was, and how the fire had saved the children and so on. I had known it all better than he did, but, somehow, I'd never had a moment to explain. He was like that, Davy Hawthorne. Always quick and capable.

He saw what I was nursing.

"What's up with the wild-hen?"

"A cat caught it, Davy," said Naomi.

"Put it down, Jeremy," Davy said. "It'll get better, and if it doesn't you can't help it."

"Oh, yes, we can," I said, not because I really thought we could, but, after all, I wasn't going to let him have things all his own way.

"You mean to say, Naomi," said Davy, "you've gone and got yourself all scratched like that just saving a wild-hen?"

"Why not?"

"I'll tell you why not," said Davy, sensible and masterful, "because those cat's scratches may leave scars and we don't want your face mucked up. What are you two doing here, anyway, sitting on a log like love's young dream when you should be down at Doc Barnaby's house having him do something about those scratches?"

He swept us up, and walked with Naomi down the path, holding her arm because anyone could see she was tired. I walked behind. Only Davy, whose sister had been murdered, was cheerful, but they were a strange family and he was such a practical kind of fellow. Naomi was sad underneath, and I couldn't help feeling I'd made a mess of things by not getting her down to Dad sooner, and oh! in lots of vague ways.

But I still carried the little brown hen, no matter what Davy had said.

VII

We were nearing my home when a faint hissing sound behind made me look about. There was Lord Nelson peeping in the oddest way round the bole of a big pine. He had a finger to his lips and was beckoning with his other hand and was saying "Pst! Pst!" and pulling warning grimaces. I didn't want to leave Naomi, and have Davy take her to our house and to my Dad Barnaby, but there was nothing for it but to drop behind. I was too fond of Lord Nelson to put my own interests first.

He drew me behind a bush so that I couldn't even see whether she missed me and looked back.

"Want a word with you, Jeremy," said Lord Nelson. He sucked in his cheeks and pouted his lips and twirled his invisible cap. I was surprised and flattered. He couldn't have been in a greater fuss had he been talking to Uncle Erasmus. "A private matter, and important, and urgent, too, if you know what I mean. A proper nasty problem. Proper nasty. I want your advice. You've got a good head on your shoulders and a good nature. You're young, too. All to the good, Jeremy. It's really a young man's business, and I'm an old codger."

"Why, anything I can do, Lord Nelson, of course, but I can't imagine——?"

Lord Nelson glanced nervously about as if he feared a host of eavesdroppers. We were all alone with the parrots and the little brown hen.

"It's about Miss Hawthorne," he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Miss Jessie Hawthorne?" I said, surprised that he should call her that instead of by her married name.

"No, no, no," he said, brushing her away with tattooed hands. "She's dead and done with, and yet in a way she's mixed up in it. No, I mean the real Miss Hawthorne, the eldest, Margaret, though I like to think of her as just Maggie."

He didn't have to say any more. The look in his seal's eyes, the reverent fondness of his tone, made it clear as the water of the stream. For the moment I was surprised and almost wanted to laugh. Miss Hawthorne was forty, and a very pleasant, kind, round woman, but I couldn't imagine anyone feeling about her as Lord Nelson obviously did. To me she seemed almost an old lady. And yet, looking at Lord Nelson, I realized he didn't see her that way by any manner of means.

"Hooray, Lord Nelson!" I said, and meant it. "You've fallen in love with her. You're going to marry her." I grabbed his gnarled hand and shook it.

"At my age," he said, apologetically. "An old codger. Ah, it don't seem right somehow, Jeremy."

"Right? Of course it's right! It's perfect."

"Ah, it's good to hear that, Jeremy," he said, much cheered. "Yes, that's nice. I had me doubts very seriously. Maggie's a proper nice young woman, and though she'd suit me fine,

well, I'm no chicken. Not but mind you, Jeremy, I think she has a certain bent towards me. I been noticing things."

"Then go and ask her this very night, Lord Nelson," I said. "And we can announce it on Deliverance Day. That'll be grand."

"But, Jeremy, that's why I had to speak to you urgent," said Lord Nelson. "This death in the family. This tragedy. Proper nasty. It somehow don't seem right to be going wooing to a house where there's been a recent death, if you follow me."

"Uncle Erasmus says they weren't a very united family," I told him. "I'll bet you he'd say now would be the very time to take their minds off things by getting Miss Hawthorne engaged."

"Now that's proper nice to hear that," said Lord Nelson. "For it's what I been thinking meself. I'm sorry for her there and her sister dead, even though as you say they didn't see much of each other, and it did seem to me it would be mighty good for her to have me asking for her hand, even if she couldn't see her way clear to take me. A kind of a compliment, you know—though I wouldn't go so far as to say much of a compliment."

"Don't be silly, Lord Nelson," I said. "From things I've noticed I'd say she was crazy about you. You only have to ask and she's yours."

Lord Nelson's face was moist. At moments he was brave and again he was afraid. To see the dear old man in such a romantic turmoil was sweet and touching.

When it was finally agreed that he should propose that night, he mopped his brow and came back to outside things.

"What's the matter with the wee hennie, Jeremy?"

"It's hurt. We're going to nurse it well again."

"Let me have a look at her, Jeremy," said Lord Nelson. "I'm a rare hand with small creatures that are hurt, though you wouldn't ever credit it for a moment to look at me."

I could credit it all right. He was always like that—so modest and gentle and helpful, my Lord Nelson. The luck of the Hawthornes had changed.

CHAPTER IX

I

DELIVERANCE DAY, as usual, was proving a great success.

In the morning there had been swimming and diving, wood-chopping, throwing the hammer and things like that, and in the early afternoon athletic events. Uncle Erasmus designed the programme with loving care. There weren't just contests for the youngsters like Davy and Naomi and me and the Murphys and the Solomons and the rest of us, though we had our fair share—the older people and the littler ones were not forgotten. There was even a knitting race for the really old ladies, and Mrs. Hawthorne who was lame, and all like that. They had to knit a scarf from our homespun wool, and how their needles tussled with the rough, stout stuff! And races for the toddlers which were won by those who could contrive to keep on their feet.

Yes, high old times on Deliverance Day!

My uncle handed out golden sovereigns to the winners, for that was the only use to which he could put the wealth he had gained by the Daybreak strike. The gold did not affect anybody's amateur standing, since the coins had no more value than if they had been medals. There was nothing to buy with them, nothing to use them for. We didn't need sovereigns to have new sandals or a new suit. We simply were glad to have them as prizes gained by skill or prowess. Tim Murphy could attach them to watch-chains or make fine jewellery for the ladies and other trophies, too, by melting them down when you had enough. He had made me a real gold cup which stood in a place of honour at home.

Back in the schooner Uncle Erasmus had summed up Tim Murphy as a waster who would be saved when he had nothing to waste, and as a cunning worker in metals as well as a good blacksmith. That had been hard to believe at the time, because Tim Murphy seemed to be just a big red-headed man who never paid any attention to his wife or family, but sat around with a bunch of the other men who were like him,

and smoked and spat and grumbled and guffawed at stories, and was either surly or in highest spirits, and acted all the time as if he were a bachelor. Uncle Erasmus had been right, as usual, however. On Quail Island Tim Murphy had changed. He still acted like a bachelor, and remained himself in many ways, but he didn't seem to miss the pubs and races any more, and was happy as could be in his smithy which was also a goldsmith's shop and jeweller's. His big, clever hands would toil for hours turning sovereigns into a pretty little brooch for some girl whose name he'd hardly know when she called to collect it.

"Ah, faith," he would say when she thanked him, "don't give it another thought. Wouldn't I go stark staring mad if I hadn't the occupation, and aren't I a poet at heart that has joy in his swate creations?"

He was out there now on the cricket pitch bowling to Aunt Grace in the match, Ladies *v.* Gentlemen. This match wasn't very serious. Only five gentlemen played against fifteen ladies. The gentlemen had to bowl under-arm, left-handed, and the ladies could throw the ball and do anything else they wished. We laughed a lot, for it was great fun. Fashions hadn't changed on Quail Island, because as nobody knew what was being worn outside it didn't seem worth while. Miss Titgens and everyone kept on making the same style of dresses. I think the ladies were conservative, too, because they felt if once they started playing with the fashions they might change them for the worse, and the knowledge that we had to remain civilized people and not become a lot of savages was still strong in us. Uncle Erasmus encouraged it.

At cricket, however, the ladies were sorely handicapped by their clothes.

All except Naomi, who still went her own way in her boy's pants which nobody noticed, and, on this occasion, Aunt Grace. Being a married woman now, I suppose she felt justified, but there had been some whispering when she appeared in a dress she had borrowed from young Rosie Murphy. Though Mrs. Paterson was so small it barely came down to her knees. She looked more like a schoolgirl than a schoolma'm. After the first surprise everybody began to smile again and say how nice she looked and how sensible it was, at least for her. It was always like that with Aunt Grace.

Tim Murphy was doing his best to get her out, and wheedling her with soft blarney and impudence, too, but Aunt Grace was hitting them about and had already scored fifteen which was very high for a Lady. She had Naomi at the other end and between them, of course, they were the hope of the side.

The smell of the roasting ox, turning slowly on its spit, drifted appetizingly through the cooling air, and after all the exertions and excitements of the long day, the thought of the slabs of sizzling underdone beef, and the good things already laid out in the school, promised a very pleasant climax. Noses were sniffing the richly scented breaths of breeze.

Aunt Grace hit the Irishman for three, and she and Naomi ran while everybody cheered. Poor Lord Nelson went pounding after the ball on his short legs, but with only four fielding when a Lady did hit one the ball usually had a good start.

I stood with Uncle Erasmus and Mr. Paterson by the flag-staff where the Union Jack fluttered as it always did on state occasions. We laughed to see old Lord Nelson puffing along while Aunt Grace and Naomi twinkled to and fro, delighted with themselves.

When the excitement died down my uncle spoke gravely to Mr. Paterson.

"Do you think, dominie, it is a good thing for your lady to be taking such violent exercise?"

Mr. Paterson wagged his head in amusement.

"She looks Dresden china, Erasmus," he said, "but she's tough as whipcord."

"In the ordinary course of events, I agree, dominie," said Uncle Erasmus, still concerned. "But she is a married woman now—and an important married woman."

Mr. Paterson looked puzzled.

"But surely there's no harm——?"

"There might be, and I should not want that."

Mr. Paterson caught my uncle's meaning at last and burst into one of his hearty, big laughs which didn't make him cough any more, and he blushed under his tan, too.

"Why, Erasmus," he said, "Grace would flay you. We haven't been married a week!"

"Great events, whole generations, can be set in train in a single moment, let alone a week," said Uncle Erasmus.

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Paterson gravely, "it's a strange thought, isn't it?"

We watched Aunt Grace out there, and it was very odd to me to think of her having babies like an ordinary woman.

A strange thing happened.

At one moment the playing-field was gay and noisy and animated in the gold of the late sunshine, and in the next a complete hush fell and a chill swept over everything. Tim Murphy about to bowl checked his arm, and Aunt Grace and Naomi forgot the game. So did the spectators. All movement stopped as it used to at the pictures when the machine broke down.

Not all movement, however.

Captain von Schomberg marched through a gap in the ring of onlookers. He moved, if possible, more stiffly than ever, and yet carefully, too, as if afraid that the stabbing pain would strike again. This gave him a queer effect, as though he were not flesh and blood but a mechanical man, an automaton. Through the hush and chill he had brought, across the field, across the centre of the pitch, he marched, looking neither to right nor left, back rigid, legs working like steel scissors.

In the happiness of Deliverance Day we had forgotten all about that German.

Now he destroyed our happiness.

I was horrified to see Jonathan start out from the crowd and attach himself to von Schomberg, like a pilot fish taking up his position beside a great, cold shark, or as if he were the captain's powder-monkey. I turned red with rage and could have hammered Jonathan with my fists until he yelled. He was only a kid, but he should have known better than to put us all to shame like that.

The captain said no word to him but accepted his presence as a matter of course, and Jonathan, as heedless of us all as the German himself, marched by his side.

There wasn't a sound from all us onlookers, not even a murmur of disgust.

So they came, the shrimp of a boy and the tall, stern man with the monocle screwed in his hard face, to within a dozen paces of where we stood, Uncle Erasmus, Mr. Paterson and I.

"Where is Holtz?" asked Captain von Schomberg in his

heavy, guttural voice, without any preface, or word or sign of greeting.

"He is dead," said Uncle Erasmus, facing him, quiet and towering up, rooted to the earth of our island like one of our pines.

"You have killed him."

"He died in a fire at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Hawthorne in which perished also his unfortunate hosts."

"That is a lie."

"It is written in the records of Quail Island which you may see at my house."

Try as he might, and he made a good attempt, Captain von Schomberg could not quite conceal that he was taken aback by this news delivered with such quiet authority.

"Why was I not told?"

"You were a sick man. You could do nothing."

"He was murdered."

"If he was murdered, as you say, why didn't we murder you, also, when we had you at our mercy, instead of allowing you to live to create this unpleasantness on our national holiday?"

Uncle Erasmus, who could be so emphatic and even flamboyant in talk and manner, was as quiet and practical as if he were a business man discussing some deal. Behind the mask of his face Captain von Schomberg was more puzzled than ever.

"I say he was murdered," he said, starting to bully.

Uncle Erasmus shrugged.

"As you wish," he said. "He was murdered, and so were poor Jim and Jessie Hawthorne. As you are my guest, I have no desire to contradict you. And so——?"

Captain von Schomberg screwed his monocle a fraction tighter into his eye, and muscles worked in his bony jaw.

"So this," he said.

He opened the double-breasted reefer coat which Mr. Solomon had made for him by my uncle's orders, and drew from it the German flag which had covered Holtz in the boat the night the strangers came to us from the sea. Without a word he handed it to my brother Jonathan.

The most terrible thing was that they had had it all planned and rehearsed, and there was no need for orders. Jonathan

knew just what he had to do, and being nimble and quick as a monkey always, he did it well. Whilst Captain von Schomberg and Uncle Erasmus faced each other, motionless, and everyone else stood paralysed, my brother Jonathan lowered the Union Jack and whipped the German flag into its place and had it at the top of the pole in the wink of an eye, and there that strange and alien flag fluttered over our Quail Island in the cool breaths of the late afternoon breeze.

He was back at his master's side before he had seemed to move. I wished the earth would open and swallow up my brother Jonathan and me so that no one would ever see us again.

We had grown accustomed to peace and quiet happiness on Quail Island. We were not fitted to deal with such a moment. We gazed in numb and dumb amaze. Oh, I know we should have done something!—raised a shout of fury, torn that insolent flag down, lynched the foreign devil, but we had become very gentle people, and perhaps slow-witted like peasants.

Only Uncle Erasmus remained himself.

"And what," he asked, as if quite interested and even a little amused, "does this piece of tomfoolery mean, my man?"

"It is not tomfoolery," said Captain von Schomberg, struggling to remain icy calm but driven to bluster and grating excitement by my uncle's words and manner. "You shall learn. I have taken possession of this island, in the name of His Imperial Highness, Wilhelm the Second, Emperor of Germany. *Hoch der Kaiser!*"

He sprang to attention, and saluted the flag, fighting the spasm of pain which the movement sent across his face.

Uncle Erasmus flung back his head and gave a bellow of laughter.

"You act like a child," he said, through his searing mirth. "We are outside the world and care nothing for your kaisers, but we prefer the flag under which we sailed. Do you seriously think that we are going to let you upset us with your silly, theatrical, pantomime gestures, with your *hochs* and your salutes and your heel-clicking? Oh, fie, man! fie—I thought you an adult."

Captain von Schomberg had no ice left. He had melted into a fire of quivering rage under my uncle's scorn.

"Laugh," he said, "laugh, old fool, but I am the German governor, and the reign of mad King Quail is ended. I sentence him to death."

He screamed the words, his guttural voice suddenly falsetto with fury, and from his pocket he whipped a big grey revolver. A laugh yapped out of him.

"We Germans think ahead. You fools did not guess this was hidden in our boat. Fools! Fools!"

Pages of history were written in the next gasp of breath.

As von Schomberg fired Mr. Paterson flung himself in front of my uncle, and simultaneously my brother Jonathan brought the blade of his big hunting knife down on the German's wrist with a terrible, sideways chop. Von Schomberg screamed with pain, and the revolver fell from his hand. My brother Jonathan had seized it before it was half-way to the ground, and holding it steady in both his hands, at the range of a foot, pulled the trigger and pulled it again and again and again, and the reports went zinging about and through our ears and minds and away into the quiet aisles of pines.

People and birds cried terror and dismay.

My brother Jonathan, whooping like a Red Indian, went on pulling the trigger though only clicks came now.

Von Schomberg pitched down like a tree falling, as he had that first night when he had come amongst us.

Now he had gone.

Jonathan jumped about, an imp possessed.

"Quack! Quack!" he said to my uncle, before anyone had found a word. "You were all talking! Quack! Quack! But I knew he was bad and planned badness. I spied on him; I was the detective; I was Sherlock Holmes."

My brother only read medical books, and, for amusement, Conan Doyle, who, he pointed out, had been a doctor, too.

There he stood, legs planted sturdily, the heavy revolver still reeking in his paws, the dead man at his feet, and it seemed to me that Jonathan was someone I'd never known at all, or surely I would never have suspected him of being a traitor to Quail Island.

In those moments Mr. Paterson had swayed and stumbled. Uncle Erasmus caught him, and laid him gently on the ground. He had a surprised look on his face, and a patch of blood spread on his vest.

Uncle Erasmus knelt beside him.

"Dominie," he said, "dominie, that was gallantly foolish of you. Say nothing. Rest quiet. Here is Barnaby."

Now that the German's spell was broken we could move and think and act again, and all the statues came to life, Dad Barnaby panted up, out of breath but efficient.

"Don't move him, Erasmus. Paterson, don't bother yourself. It's going to be all right. Here, Davy!—run and bring me my bag from the table at my place. Run! Run! Run!"

Davy ran, faster than he had when he trounced me in the mile. I could only beat him in the sprints.

"Keep the people back, Erasmus," said Dad Barnaby. "This is not a peep-show."

My uncle stood up, and gave the order, and everybody paused where they were and waited quietly, awed, all save Aunt Grace who came running swiftly, the short skirt fluttering. I had known Aunt Grace's face since I could remember, but I had never seen it like this. All the colour had drained from it, all the loveliness, all the laughter. It was white, set, a plaster mask. Only her eyes were alive, and every bit of her blazed in them. I learnt, seeing her, how terrible and dangerous and cruel it was to be in love.

"Grace!" warned Dad, professional finger raised.

She had come like a whirlwind, but at that she worked a miracle with herself. When she knelt beside her husband she was normal, as far as one could see.

"Heart," she said, so quietly.

"Dear heart." It was a choked whisper.

"He mustn't be excited, he mustn't talk," Dad said.

"Must—may be—little time," said Mr. Paterson. "Listen, O my dear. We have—lived thousand lives. To have loved you—been loved by you—enough—more than enough—any man."

"You mustn't talk," said Dad Barnaby, for the patch was spreading and every word had cost him dear.

"No more," he said. "Grace talk—Doc."

He lay back easier, and even managed a bit of a smile.

"My lamb, my life," said Aunt Grace, not knowing there was another soul on the face of the globe, "this isn't death, though we needn't fear even death, we two. We go on. And what's more, darling, even here on this silly earth we shall go on."

Mr. Paterson moved his head in agreement and his little smile was there again.

"Uncle Erasmus says—not—play cricket."

She couldn't have known what we'd been saying, but she knew what he meant.

"You old braggart, you. So already you've been boasting of your chubby son, old skin-and-bones. And no possible means of knowing except your loving heart, dear heart. Since you are so urgent, I must not fail you. I will not, old skin-and-bones." She laid her cool hand on his brow, and he needed that soothing, for now the first numbing shock wore off his brow was hurt by pain.

Dad took charge again.

"You and Lord Nelson stay, Erasmus. And a messenger. And the stretcher can be brought. I must see to him here while the light holds, and then perhaps we can move him. Let the rest get on with Deliverance Day, and leave us in peace."

Uncle Erasmus stepped forward, and there before him was Jonathan.

"Boy," he said, "you are a brat with your Quack! Quack! but justified, justified. And you did Quail Island a service as Mr. Sherlock Holmes. I have always said you had the makings. We thank you, boy."

My brother Jonathan stood beaming, and at that moment Rosie Murphy, her head a mass of red curls, a rip in her new party frock, rushed up to him and flung her arms round his neck and kissed him, just as if they were man and woman.

"Johnny, me lovely great hero," cried Rosie Murphy in her rich brogue. "Haven't you been and gone and slain the last of the devils sent to plague us. Oh, Johnny, ye're the marvel of men."

"Don't make a chap look silly, Rosie," said Jonathan, delighted but blushing. "Not here. Not now."

Rosie, however, continued to hug him to her as if he were her dearest possession, and I saw that my little brother Jonathan's life had been going on all the time my back was turned and I was busy with my own growing up, and I was prouder of him than words can say. He had been so smart, even to having the knife ready open in his pocket, that I couldn't be jealous of him having saved Uncle Erasmus though I would have given anything in the world to have done so.

People were so overwrought that the sight of the two youngsters started hysterical titters, and I suppose in a way they did look funny, being only children, and Rosie not caring for anyone, but the hero very abashed.

"Good folk," said Uncle Erasmus immediately, "we are under doctor's orders. And mine. I command you prepare the feast as if nothing were amiss. Solomon and Green bring the stretcher for when it's needed. Wait aside, you, Jonathan, lest we need a messenger. You, Ancient, and Davy, and you, Tim Murphy, are the funeral party. Haul down the German's silly flag, and take the boat. He is not entitled to rest in God's Acre. Weight his body, and drop him into the sea, far out. We want no more of him. Wrap his flag about him as a last unmerited courtesy. Go now, one and all, and do these things. On Deliverance Day we are delivered of the evil that came out of the world. Let us be merry now, and give thanks. Go now."

He waved us away, and we did his bidding.

II

Dead calm, and hosts of stars golden in black sky and black water. The long sweeps Petersen had made were heavy, and yet the steady rhythm of the task was soothing in a way, steadying, after all the excitements of the day. Davy and I pulled one a-piece sitting on the same thwart, with Mr. Murphy's big shadow bending before us, his blacksmith's arms pulling two oars. Silver whirls burned into cold whiteness where the blades dipped and rose, and went swirling away astern, but otherwise all was sable.

"Rest on yer oars, m'lads," said Mr. Murphy, doing so himself. "'Tis a weary task in the midst of a holiday, but faith! a proud one, for once we've dumped him, then we're rid for good and all of the Germans which is a holy and a wholesome thought, God rest his black soul. I must take some refreshment."

A bottle tilted, blotting out whole worlds, and we thought, of course, he was just taking a swig of water, but then, though I could hardly credit my own nostrils, a familiar smell crept through the heavy air.

"Mr. Murphy," I exclaimed, amazed, "you're drinking rum!"

"And why not, m'lad?" he asked. "Have ye no respect for the dead corpse propped up in the bows and grinnin' at the backs of yer heads? Have ye ever heard of a burial without a dram for the grave-digger? What kind of haythen are ye, entirely?"

"But it must be Mr. Quail's rum."

"Now there ye're wrong as an Orangeman," said Mr. Murphy. "'Twas his once, but 'tis mine now, more power to me elbow." And the bottle went up again and gurgled.

"You mean you steal it?" I said, for there had never been stealing on Quail Island and I was shocked to think of my uncle's precious rum going down Mr. Murphy's throat.

"The harsh tongues of the young—the cruel, harsh, bitter tongues," Mr. Murphy sighed. "If I wasn't a father meself I'd give ye one over the head wi' me oar. Stealing is it, you say?—when I do no more than gather a crumb here and there when opportunity offers, a mere crumb, me boysie, from the rich man's table, like Lazarus of old, if Lazarus it was. But a mere crumb. Now and then I pick up a drop, like a Dublin sparrer, but faith! niver so much as he'd miss or he'd have me strung up on the gallows like the Cromwell he is. And if it's so little he doesn't miss it at all at all, how can it be a crime in the name of all the blessed saints? And tell me this, m'lads, did ye iver hear tell of an Irishman without a taste of the stuff? Or iver know a good man after yer own hearts who hadn't a taste for it? Stop arguing and abusin' now, and let's be busy."

So we rowed again, and somehow, the way Mr. Murphy put it, even I couldn't be cross with him, though I knew him for a rascal. And presently, when we were far enough out, and we did not stint the distance for we wanted him right away from Quail Island, we boated our oars again. Then Mr. Murphy climbed aft and wrapped the stiff corpse in the German flag and knotted a great piece of iron cable about his middle.

"'Tis a cruel waste of fine colourful material," said Mr. Murphy, "which would make grand bloomers for the missus, though a bit harsh maybe. Still, orders must be obeyed, or that uncle of yours would know and be lifting up pore Mrs.

Murphy's skirts and throwing her into a fever and discovering what I'd done—for he knows everything like a parish priest. Over ye go, me bucko, and may God in his wisdom have such mercy on yer soul as is proper. I lave it at that."

He gave a great heave, and Captain von Schomberg lurched up against the stars in one stiff piece, like a figure made of wood. He caused a great splash, and splatters of water fell on us, cold and salt as tears but there were no other tears at that burial. The dark sea boiled silver for a little space and then the bright wound healed over again in darkness where the stars were mirrored.

"If you were worth it, and I could be sure of not shaming meself by fergettin' the words I'd say a 'Hail, Mary' for you," said Mr. Murphy, brushing his hands together, "but as things are, I think I'll just content meself with drinkin' the health of young Jonathan Quail who stopped ye dead in yer dirty doings, and coupling his name with that of me daughter, Rosie, bless her fiery head." He drank deep.

"M' lads," he said then, "in the midst of life we are in death. And t'other way round. It's a great wonder to me two fine lads, the like of yerselves, aren't looking about for wives. There's young Jonathan, a babe compared with ye, and yet he's made his choice, and a good one, too, though I say it. They're children, of course, but 'twill last, and when it comes to their time to live in sin with no authority save that of ould Erasmus—but the Lord will forgive, for there isn't a priest within ten thousand miles, and it is not good for man to live alone—when they come to be married, then she'll never give him a dull moment. She's wild as a briar and straight as an arrow. 'Twill be heaven and hell. Ah, that's the way it should be."

He drank again, and the boat sat quietly in the sea. It was strange to think of the terrible Captain von Schomberg down there on the sea's bed with the fish he had frightened at first coming back to nose at him.

"'Twas never so with me," he said sadly. "Maureen is the swatest woman that iver was born, but no man can be tight held by one whose lacking a trace of the divil. It leaves him bemused, and he wanders. That's the way it's been with me—the father of four and yet never what you might call a family man. Doing my duty in the marriage

bed and out of it, mind ye, and yet absent-minded about it, if you take my meaning. So I'm happy to think I've installed a bit of the devil in all me lassies. They'd lead a feller a life, but he'd know he was living. They'd scratch their Dad's eyes out if they heard the way he was talking to the like of youse, but remember it, me lads, remember it. And now let's be getting back to the great feastings and fun and frivolity, and if ye don't dance with Molly and Sheelagh and Eileen I'll give ye one now in advance with me oar."

My uncle would have been angry about his rum, but he would have been pleased it made Mr. Murphy into a family man, and certainly all the Misses Murphy were beautiful in their wild milk-and-roses way with their hot dark blue eyes that, my mother used to say, had been put in with sooty fingers.

We bent to the oars, and left Captain von Schomberg lying down on the bed of the sea.

III

The only occasions on which we lit the hall were Christmas and Deliverance Day. Tallow candles were a nuisance to make and ate up a lot of material, and to be of any use there had to be hundreds of them. So that, when the hall was lit—and then we did it on a grand scale—it seemed brighter to us than all the lights of the cities we remembered, brighter than the sun in glory.

Coming in from our dark journey on the dark sea the place looked like a fairy palace for it was set not merely against the black background of the island but against unmeasured leagues and leagues of night where there was nothing of man at all, not one small gleam.

Mr. Murphy picked leaves from a bush. They smelt of peppermints, but much stronger, and they burned the mouth. He didn't seem to mind and chewed busily. Discretion had sobered him, also, and no one would ever have suspected that tilted bottle. He had sent us on ahead and dropped back a moment and hidden it somewhere. Father of a family of girls, good blacksmith and metal worker, Mr. Tim Murphy

remained a very cunning scamp. In my heart I was glad to have found him so. We were such good people on Quail Island.

As we drew near the strains of "The Dollar Princess" floated out to us. The record was scratched and worn and wheezy, but this music, like the lights, was a rare treat and so it sounded enchanting, and made me proud to feel that though the years went by we could recapture the echoes of the world back there and turn them loose on the island air for our enjoyment.

The hall, decorated with greenery and carefully preserved flags and pennons, was a cheerful sight, but it was sad to look about and not see Aunt Grace. She always loved a party, and kept a swirl of fun about her. No fun for her that night, and yet I knew somehow she wasn't just miserable. She had that new happiness in her which needed no bright lights or flags, and all because of Mr. Paterson.

Uncle Erasmus came to meet us.

"The news is as good as can be expected, Ancient," he said. "Mr. Paterson is gravely wounded, but Dr. Barnaby is with him and has hopes. It is Grace Paterson's wise and characteristic wish that our celebrations should continue as though nothing were amiss, and, as you see, we obey. There is ample left to eat for you young wolves. Your task is done, Ancient?"

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus. As you ordered."

"Good. Of his bones are coral made." He turned to the blacksmith, big nose sniffing the reek of mint, bright eyes quizzing. "I do believe you're becoming a vegetarian, Tim Murphy," he said, mockingly grave, and Mr. Murphy swayed from foot to foot and looked as if he would have liked to have crossed himself, because I was the only one who faced it all the time that Uncle Erasmus knew everything. "Come with me, honest smith," he said. "An Irishman who has been at sea with a corpse requires something stronger than is available to the general. Come with me, Tubal Cain, into the little private room and let us see what we can find."

Mr. Murphy looked more abashed than ever.

"Glory be, yer honour," he said, "ye're a great man. Ah, faith, ye're a great man and may we always be worthy of ye."

"That might be difficult," said my uncle, and he chuckled.

They went away together, and Davy and I hurried to two vacant places at the tables round the side, ravenous after the long day and all the things we had done, from running races to seeing sudden death and burying a man. The beef melted in our mouths and the potatoes were like snowballs and Miss McGregor's cakes and my mother's cookies sat sweet and light on top. Before we had finished the dancing began, but it was a polka and I was still hungry. Davy, however, left his place and darted off and found Naomi. They liked dancing together, which was no wonder, for they were both very good, and you could see people nodding approvingly at them and saying things like: "What a handsome pair!"

But the next dance was a waltz, so I had the luck, for to waltz with Naomi was the finest thing of all. Lord Nelson had taken poor Mr. Paterson's place by the gramophone, and Miss Hawthorne sat comfortable and round and beaming in a chair close by. Their engagement was still a secret, and yet, knowing of it, I felt that anyone had only to look at her to see that something very exciting had happened to that usually placid, good-tempered lady.

Perhaps cunning old Lord Nelson knew that I would be dancing with Naomi. Anyway, he had searched about—like a bear, more clumsy than ever from terror lest he break one of the precious records, sweating slightly—and had found what he knew was my favourite, "The Blue Danube."

I ran across to Naomi. Davy was just putting his arm about her, and he scowled when I bowed before her and asked for the pleasure, as we had been taught to do. Davy scowled because he, too, thought that to waltz with her was the finest thing of all, but he had been in such a hurry to get in first that he had left a cake unfinished, and now it was my turn and he could go back to his cake.

Naomi wasn't silly about her boy's clothes. She didn't wear them when they weren't right. For our big evening parties Miss Titgens had made her a frock from one of my mother's dresses—a beautiful dress she was very fond of which she wouldn't have given to anyone but Naomi whom she treated like a daughter. It was made of very old lace, and was quite valuable. Even in Sydney it had only been worn on very special occasions, and afterwards wrapped up in paper with camphor and put away in a drawer. My

mother had always looked her loveliest in it, and so did Naomi now. The heavy lace had mellowed into the colour of old ivory, so that you could hardly tell where it ended and Naomi's skin began. She was as light to waltz with as a reed, and her body felt firm and smooth and cool, like the trunk of a sapling.

Yes, it was fine to waltz with Naomi but though my arm was about her and her small hand rested on mine, she wasn't with me. I feared it was because she would rather have been dancing with Davy.

"Forgive me," Naomi said, as soon as I had thought that. "It's grand, Jeremy. Only I love Aunt Grace."

I felt so ashamed of what I had been thinking that I nearly stood on her foot, and of the younger men I was the best waltzer on Quail Island. Everyone admitted that.

"But it's going to be all right, Naomi," I said, giving her a little comforting squeeze.

"They danced so perfectly together," said Naomi. "They loved this waltz best of all. I suppose lovers always have, since the very first time it was played. They were such lovers, Aunt Grace and Mr. Paterson. It was a pity they didn't find out sooner."

"Isn't it funny, Naomi," I said, remembering what I'd been thinking earlier, "that Aunt Grace, who could have had any man she wanted, should finally be so completely happy and wrapped up in Mr. Paterson? He's the nicest gentleman you could wish, and good and clever, but there's nothing sensational about him. You ought to have seen the beaux she sent away in Sydney. One of them had a motor-car."

"Motor-car, pooh!" said Naomi. "Women like Aunt Grace don't fall in love with motor-cars. They fall in love with just one man and there it is and no undoing it and no explaining it. Nobody can tell why. They can't even tell themselves. But there it is."

Aunt Grace herself had said something very like that.

Naomi was quiet and sad again.

"He'll get better as sure as sure," I consoled her.

Naomi moved her black, smooth head very slightly in denial.

"You don't think so?" I asked, afraid, for Naomi was so wise.

"She will have his baby and their little time, Jeremy."

We could talk about anything, Naomi and I.

"If he dies perhaps she won't even have their baby," I said. "Lots of people are married for years and don't have children. They've only had a few nights."

Naomi made the same motion of her head.

"Of course, nobody could be sure yet in the ordinary way, Jeremy. But Aunt Grace is sure. And I am sure. Mr. Paterson's baby is there, though it's so small you couldn't see it. But it's there, Jeremy, and that makes all the difference."

It wasn't like Naomi to speak in that reverent kind of way.

"But, Naomi," I said, "I always thought you thought babies didn't matter at all—in fact that you disliked them."

Naomi's firm body gave an impatient little shrug.

"Oh, Jeremy," she said, crossly, "do stop talking. This isn't a debate. We're supposed to be waltzing. Let's waltz. I suppose you can reverse?"

She was right, of course. Our words couldn't help Aunt Grace or Mr. Paterson, and it was better to enjoy the dance while the music lasted, for though Lord Nelson had put the needle back to the start again it could not go on for ever.

The next dance was a one-step, and Solly, Mr. Solomon's eldest, came quickly to claim Naomi because he had booked the dance, and was determined to have it. He was lithe and long and hook-nosed and sad-faced with black eyes—like a Red Indian—but he was very good at the new dances, and didn't dance like anybody else, but made up new steps which had never been taught us and went his own way as if he owned the music and it owned him.

I suppose it was pretty to watch how Naomi followed him so easily when she hadn't an idea what he would do next—which she would have known in a proper dance—but somehow he was so sure and smooth it used to rile me a bit. Also, he seemed to hold her much tighter than was the custom, but I suppose he had to do that so that she would know where he was going.

The sight of Mr. Murphy coming out of the little room, and looking mightily pleased with himself, reminded me: he hadn't given us one in advance with the oar. All his red-headed daughters were already claimed, however, but my brother Jonathan was next to me with Rosie.

"Now then, Jonathan," I said, "don't be greedy. What about giving a poor old 'un a chance? You may be the hero of the evening, but Rosie might like a real partner for a change."

"Curious, aren't you?" mocked Jonathan. "Go ahead, Rosie. Don't over-tire him. I'm going to get some more pie. See you in our corner."

So Rosie and I danced, and it was amazing the way the nippers were growing up. Only yesterday she'd been a kid you wouldn't even notice, but I noticed her now. She treated me like a funny old man, a slow-coach, and her bold, ocean-blue eyes were full of fun and teasing. Her skin was the whitest thing I had ever seen. Like marble. One would never have thought it could ever have been out in our hot sun. Her red tumble of curls burned down below my chin like a fire. And though she was still only a child she was more like a woman to hold than most partners on Quail Island. She was vibrant and alive and sort of trembly, like a compressed spring. Indeed, the discovery of Rosie Murphy was so startling that for a bit I didn't know what to say.

"So you and Jonathan are sweethearts, Rosie?" I said, and somehow she made me talk as if I were a doddering uncle.

"You bet," said Rosie. "We're going to be married just as soon as we're big enough, and it's hundreds of babies we'll be after having, so it's a good thing Jonny's going to be a doctor, and it's a good thing, faith! we live here, where there'll be no trouble at all about rearing the swarms of them. Ah, the fun we'll be having, and if Jonny doesn't behave and do just as he's told why I'll take me sandal to him and tan the hide offer him."

"That sounds a bit ominous, Rosie," I said, all uncle.

"Ah, but think when I kiss his poor hurts and heal them with love," said Rosie Murphy. "The lucky divil will have to be wicked again for the joy and delight of being comforted."

She rattled on like that, and if ever a girl was her father's daughter, then that one was Rosie Murphy. Some of the things she said made my brows lift a little—since she made me feel such an old codger of an uncle—and yet I could think no harm of her, because there wasn't real harm in it, but only a great bubble of life wanting to burst out.

And feeling a hundred years old, I could agree with Mr.

Murphy that whatever Jonathan's marriage turned out to be it certainly wouldn't be dull. And thinking of my little brother Jonathan it occurred to me that he would give as good as he got, and that life in the cabin of Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Quail would be a fine old hurly-burly with always a new baby in the cot and always more to be done than could be done to keep the place straight, and the very parrots scared away by the constant din of laughter and talk and tears and more laughter.

I was almost out of breath, what with one thing and another, when we finished the dance.

Uncle Erasmus beat the gong, a happy sound which told us not to be afraid of what he was about to say. He stood on the platform at the end which was Mr. Paterson's in the daytime.

"Friends," he boomed, "I have a romantic announcement to make. You will all be delighted with this happy piece of holiday news. Our good friend, Lord Nelson, has authorized me to announce his engagement and forthcoming marriage to Miss Hawthorne, Margaret Hawthorne, our Maggie."

At that there was a terrific hullabaloo. Everyone started to cheer and wave and clap and jump about and laugh. Lord Nelson stood by the gramophone, sweat pouring down his face, his tattooed hands twirling, in a perfect frenzy, the cap that wasn't there. He kept bowing his big head like one of those Chinese figures. And Miss Hawthorne, scarlet and glowing, a cabbage rose, jumped up from her chair and stood beside him, bobbing up and down in happy curtsies which almost became a dance.

And when the din subsided we started to chant: "Speech! Speech! Speech!"

Lord Nelson was too proud and delighted to feel abashed. He took Miss Hawthorne's plump arm through his and patted her hand.

"Dears," he said, which was the last beginning we had expected and yet perfect as he said it, "dears, we thank you. You see two happy people who are grateful to you for sharing their happiness, if you get my meaning. Ah, it's proper nice." But he had something else up his sleeve. I knew him so well I could see him hauling it down as if it were solid like a conjurer's rabbit. He looked awfully knowing. "And there's

this, too," he said. "Mr. Quail, sir, it was you that insisted on making of me an officer which I never ever wanted. Mr. Mate, you used to call me." He held up a stocky finger to warn us that here it was. "Ah, but Mr. Quail, sir, and you, my dears, now the shoe's on the other foot: I've found me a Mate and she's the Captain, too."

There, it was out!

He was delighted with himself, and stood shaken with laughter at his own fine turn of humour, mopping. And no joke in a public speech ever had a better reception. We swarmed about them, shaking their hands, kissing Maggie, slapping Lord Nelson on the back, and the pair of them were crying so much and laughing so much that it was as well Lord Nelson had got his speech out of the way first.

So, I saw, you could be any age, and still find love.

Presently, Uncle Erasmus rescued them and took them away to the private room, and they didn't come back again, but went out through the other door into the quiet night to be together with their happiness as if they had been boy and girl.

Mr. Solomon took charge of the gramophone, and we did a boisterous barn dance, started by the older people because this news was thrilling and making the romp a part of our pleasure about Lord Nelson and his Maggie.

It grew late and the hundreds of candles burned low. Soon the last waltz and "Auld Lang Syne."

Uncle Erasmus struck the gong again, one solemn, warning note. He towered up on Mr. Paterson's dais.

All the noise and chatter and laughter snapped off. We faced him in rigid silence, awaiting the news which would be no news at all.

"The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away," my uncle's golden voice tolled. "Blessed be the name of the Lord. Our brother, our good dominie, our friend, died ten minutes ago in the arms of his wife. Strange though it may seem to our poor finite human minds, he died a happy man. He is now in that other Promised Land which is so much fairer than this. Let us pray in silence."

And dancers and gossips, young and old, knelt down on the boards beneath the brave, gay flags, in the light of the guttering candles, and bowed their heads.

IV

I was shaving, for, though only a youngster and fair, my beard grew heavily, and Uncle Erasmus decreed that we should be clean and neat and civilized, and not like members of some silly, sloppy sect. He was right in that, as in all other ways, for it kept us sane and normal.

Doubtless the emotional stresses and strains of the previous twenty-four hours had much to do with it, but all in a flash it was as if I had stepped into the bit of silver mirror and was looking out at Me. Instead of just the face I pulled the razor across which was in the glass, I was inside looking out. And I saw a big, clumsy lad, built as my uncle had said once, to the Quail design like him. There was no character in the face, as there was in his—time and life had had to write those lines—but it was a Quail face in embryo, taking his as the real Quail face. The nose was there, already shaping into a hawk's; the eyes were blue and bright and questing; the line of the jaws was strong; the brow wide and clear; the hair golden as a sovereign. Even this stubble at which I scraped, lathered with our rough soap which formed a brown foam—even this stubble could grow in time into my uncle's proud beard and moustache.

I was never more surprised in my life than by this realization of myself as not just Jeremy, or the powder-monkey or the Ancient, or young Quail, but Me.

My eyes, looking out at Me from the mirror, turned round with wonder and pride. For if that was Jeremy Quail he was somebody.

I came out of the mirror and put the razor down and forgot it, the lather still on my face and only my right cheek shaved.

Everybody else had grown up, even Jonathan, and here was I still in the cocoon, drowsing along, waiting for life to begin, happy enough, but dallying. At any second a pine might fall, lightning strike, a meteor flash out of the serene sky, and where would Naomi and I be then? Aunt Grace, Mr. Paterson. They had only had days.

Naomi and I—we—for all we knew—we might only have minutes.

I ran out of the bedroom, out of our home where mother and Dad Barnaby and Ruth and Jonathan were just beginning to wake up, and I ran down by the stream under the pines, the parrots chattering sleepily. The day brightened and all the sky was rose. The stream which sparkled through our days chuckled beside me. I ran, racing the falling pine, the lightning, the meteor, the sharp axe of Fate. I ran.

The Nunnery sat there, snug and happy. Smoke rose from the kitchen chimney for they were early astir, with Miss Titgens such a busy little body and Naomi needing no more sleep than a flower.

I ran, racing pine, lightning, meteor and Fate, straight through the house into the kitchen, and there at the stove, cooking bacon and eggs in a frying-pan, stood Naomi, bare-footed, in her boy's clothes, her hair unbrushed, the quiet of sleep still in her eyes and face.

And having run so fast, I stood there, breathless, the lather crackling on my cheeks.

Naomi turned about from the stove and held out her small brown hands. She didn't seem surprised, but she lit up golden and bright as a candle in a cave.

"Why, Jeremy," she said, "you have come early though you were so long in coming."

My legs wouldn't move and yet I was there, holding her bare arms above the elbows.

"Namy," I said, as well as I could, "you should hate me for a fool."

"A fool?" said she. "Oh, no, you are just my Jeremy. Hate you? Oh, no, you are my love."

There was a lot more I had ready on my tongue—the golden time I had wasted, my stupidity, my wickedness—it was all dammed up there, though I hadn't thought a single word of it since I found out and started to run faster than I ever had before.

I was not to speak one word of it, except in teasing afterwards, and some of it long afterwards.

For I had my little Namy in my arms, and my arms were stronger than my uncle's had ever been despite all his digging for gold, and I was taller than a giant, and at the same time my arms were as feeble as a lace of foam along our beach

and I was littler than I had been on the day I was born. It was like that, outside sense.

And Naomi, the cool, the sure, the sun-dappled, the girl in boy's clothes who was always a girl, the playmate and the friend, the wise and fearless little freckled thing in the sugar sack—Naomi, Namy, melted into me so that there was nothing else at all.

Miss Titgens was in the kitchen in a flutter of soft but wild delight like a moth at a lamp.

"Oh," she piped, "oh, oh, oh! What a fume! What a mess! Oh, I can't see the nose on my face! Oh, I'm so happy I could sing! Oh, the eggs, the bacon! Oh, we'll never get the smell out! Oh, the frying-pan. Oh, bless you, my darlings, and it's about time. Oh, oh, oh!"

The walls came back, the roof, the floor, the kitchen. I don't know what had happened to the bacon and eggs but they had filled the whole place with a cloud of blue, rancid smoke so that we could hardly breathe. It was more like a scene in hell than heaven, Miss Titgens fluttering through it, and Naomi and I still quivering so that we could feel our bare knees knocking together. I think it was our knees knocking together like that—I believe you could have heard them, castanets—which started us laughing, our mouths still together, and brought us back to earth. We didn't know it then but one of our greatest possessions was to be shared laughter, no matter whether it were appropriate or not.

Naomi let go of me and ran after that fluttering moth, Miss Titgens, who was trying in vain and without caring whether she did so, to push the foul fumes out by fluttering her skirt. Naomi seized little Miss Titgens' hands and swung her round as if they were going to play Ring-a-ring-a-rosy.

"I've got him at last," she cried. "He's mine at last, Jennie? Was he worth waiting for?"

I stood in their small kitchen, choking, shaking, feeling as if my head and shoulders must burst through the roof or I should smother.

"Oh, oh," gasped Miss Titgens. "Stop, wild thing, stop. Oh, let me get my breath." And when she had, as well as she could in that kitchen, she spoke to me, not Naomi. "Jeremy," she begged, "throw the frying-pan through the window."

I grabbed the handle, and it was red hot, so that I let fly an oath which was the last thing I had in mind, but I managed to heave the stinking pan out into the garden all the same. It fell black and noisome among their flowers in the bright morning.

"Honeysuckle," Miss Titgens was saying, "Honeysuckle!"—and holding Naomi in one arm and stroking her black hair.

Now there was a funny name for an old maid to call Naomi—an old maid my uncle had found on a Sydney tram and whose whole life seemed to be plying her needle and pedalling her machine and making clothes for the ladies. I had never thought of Naomi by fancy names like that, but only as something clear and cool as spring-water. And yet hearing Miss Titgens croon the word so lovingly, it struck me that Naomi could be honeysuckle, too—honeysuckle on a warm summer's night, rich and gentle and sweet, and a scent you could never put in a bottle but only have as part of the night.

Of course, I was very young and very in love and I suppose any pretty name Miss Titgens called her would have seemed right to me.

Only yesterday Naomi and I had been a boy and a girl without a compliment between us, and rude sometimes, and I had been cross because she liked Davy so much.

"Oh, you pair of sillies, you pair of sillies," chided Miss Titgens, still fluttering. "With all the perfect times you've had—the moon and the pines, the beach and the stars and the sea, a very Eden for lovers, and you would go and have your proposal in our kitchen with eggs and bacon burning."

"Jennie," laughed Naomi, "don't jump to conclusions. He hasn't asked me to marry him yet."

And she gave me such an impudent, challenging look that I took a couple of long strides and I lifted her up and held her in the air, and I said: "Namy, will you marry me?"

"Why, yes please, Mr. Jeremy Quail, sir!" she said, and I kissed her again as I put her down but lightly now, just for the lovely fun of it and because she was a cheeky brat whose pigtailed should still have been tied up with bits of string.

The place was clearing, and Miss Titgens was wiping her eyes on the end of her flowered skirt and showing her petticoat, which I am sure was something she had never done before in all her neat and proper life.

So I went and kissed Miss Titgens on the lips, above the hem of her dress, and she blushed sunset.

"A fine beginning," said Naomi, "but that's what comes of marrying the handsomest man on Quail Island." She checked my rush to her, hands flat and pushing against the air. "Look, Jeremy," she said.

There in a small sewing-basket lined with blue plush was the little brown hen, almost better and snug and at home, and watching all these great events with round black eyes.

I had had about as much happiness and emotion as I could stand. I clumped out of the room and sat on the verandah steps looking at the quiet battalions of the pines and waiting for Naomi to straighten up and come and see Uncle Erasmus. It was all very well for my uncle to cry, but even he didn't do it in public.

Of course, I didn't have to tell Naomi we were going straight off to see Uncle Erasmus.

V

With a million things unsaid, and with no need to say them, we went together hand in hand, swinging our arms and tingling when they touched, up through the growing day to my uncle's house. Our hearts were singing.

In the ordinary way Uncle Erasmus would have been dressed and finished breakfast, but he was too big a man to have to set himself a routine and stick to it in case he grew slack. This morning he had lain abed in his big airy room, and now was only taking his shower. Come to think of it yesterday had not been light or easy for him.

Come weal, come woe, Uncle Erasmus had to sing under his shower. We heard him as we approached:

In a cavern in a canyon
Excavating for a mine,
Dwelt a miner, forty-niner,
And his daughter, Clementine.

We were so eager to tell him that we could not wait.

"Sir, Uncle Erasmus!" I shouted.

"Mr. Uncle! Mr. Uncle!" cried Naomi in her voice that was pretty as a lark's.

He came out a second later, towel wrapped about his loins, silver water streaming from him. Whenever I saw him like that I thought of Neptune or some big, brave, kind god. We stood, tongue-tied, and he came across on his bare feet, moving over the grass as if he was no weight at all. He laid a wet hand on each of our heads, and for all its size his hand on my hair was light as a feather and gentle as a kiss.

"Children," he said, "let me guess. You are in love. You are going to be married. I am astounded. I am amazed. I am also delighted."

He was laughing joyously in his beard, and the little drops of water splashed from his arms on to our faces.

"Mr. Uncle," said Naomi, "you are a tease."

"Come, Namy," said my uncle, calling her that out of his memory, which, the thought occurred to me, was so faultless because it dwelt in his heart and not his mind, "you would not have me such an old fool—or make you out to be such young fools—as to accept as news something which every living soul on Quail Island has known since before our first Deliverance Day."

Well, there was a proper shock for me.

"Mr. Uncle," said Naomi, and she took his vast wet hand from her head and put it to her lips—only that—and by golly! that nearly made my uncle, Mr. Erasmus Quail, burst into tears right in front of us. She continued to hold his hand.

"Not Davy Hawthorne, Uncle Erasmus, sir?" I said. "Nor even Solly Solomon? They'd no idea!"

Uncle Erasmus pressed Naomi's tiny hand and smiled at her, leaving me out though I couldn't be jealous, seeing it was Naomi, and he said to me, gravely: "Ah, yes, I had forgotten Davy and Solly. I had forgotten them completely." And he and Naomi went on with their private joke.

"You have made a wise choice, Naomi," said my uncle, "for one day this young man will sit in my chair and reign in my place. I do not envy him, but the task must be done, and he is my choice. He will not be able to do it unless he can approach a lot nearer to the Lord, but that will come with time and the Lord is patient with his children. You in your own pagan way will help him there, Naomi."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Uncle," said Naomi, not minding being called a pagan though I was hurt, for she went to church just the same as all the rest of us.

"He has a lot to learn, Naomi, but he is very young, and now he will grow. I give you this as a betrothal gift, my children. You may call your first son Erasmus."

Naomi let go his hand, and dropped down briefly on her knee and up again, so prettily.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Uncle," she said, and indeed it was a fine thing, for my uncle had decided that no child should be called after him on Quail Island, giving as his reason that if all the eldest boys were named Erasmus it would be silly and confusing.

"And talking of that," said my uncle, "the sooner you are married the better. Aunt Grace will not mind. She is a wise, rich woman. The wheel turns. Life and love and death; death and love and life. It is the only perpetual motion man can find. Come, Ancient," he said, tone changing suddenly, "come, boy, that is good, or has love addled your brain?"

"It's true, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said.

"True, and my own," said Uncle Erasmus. "Once when I was a lonely man who dwelt in lonely places I quoted largely from my beloved books. Now that I am the father of a great family, and lonely no more, I find my own words come to me. A point of some kind there! But I digress. Quack! Quack! You are in no mood at the moment for such musings. Your marriage now! Ah, that is more to the point, eh? That quickens you, eh? I would not have you married on the same day as my Lord Nelson. Marriage should not be a mass affair. Let them be married on Wednesday. You can be married on Saturday. Two more festivals with which to fight the harvest of death and gloom that was the Germans' sowing. That is good. On Saturday then."

I couldn't even imagine that Saturday as something real in the calendar.

"No, Mr. Uncle," said Naomi and her tone was suddenly stubborn, "it won't do at all."

"Won't do?" roared my uncle, glaring down at her. "Won't do? You have wasted time enough. Won't do, you dare to say, girl! What do you mean, won't do?"

Naomi wasn't a bit afraid.

"If you think, Mr. Uncle, you're going to poke us off into some dirty old cabin—or even some nice one—where other people have lived and died you're wrong. We want a brand new home, our very own, and we want to live on the tip of East Point looking into the dawn."

Now we had never said a word of any of this, and it was a great surprise to me, but I saw she was right.

I thought my uncle would be angry at a mere bit of a girl dictating like this to him on his island, but instead he did an extraordinary thing: he stooped down and gripped Naomi round the waist and swung her high up into the air above his head as I have seen fathers do with their babies, and it made Naomi feel so like a baby that she crowed with joy.

Then he swung her down and set her on her feet.

"He works in a mysterious way," said Uncle Erasmus. "For the life of me I couldn't have told you why I never allowed any building on East Point which is the finest estate we have. For the life of me I couldn't——! Now it grows clear! Blessed be His Name." He paused a moment, water still glistening on him, wrapped only in a towel, but as reverent as if he were in church and making us as reverent. "That is the place for you two and for yours. You will look out into the east and see always the new day, the dawn, and always to-morrow. I shall be a skull and a few bones in God's Acre—also, poor Yorick I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy—but you and yours will go on. I have founded a dynasty by accident and without my personal ego being concerned. That is admirable. That is as I would have it. East Point is yours, and you shall be married on Saturday."

"But, Mr. Uncle," said Naomi, I standing there dumb and unable to cope with this rush and sweep after all I had been through, "what about our home?"

"I am Erasmus Quail, Namy," said my uncle. "The harvest can wait. On second thoughts even Lord Nelson's marriage can wait. He is the last man alive to deny youth its golden hours. Yes, everything can wait. We have ample store of material and ample labour. Save for the most necessary chores, no man or woman raises a finger between now and next Saturday except to build and furnish your home.

It will be ready for you to step into. It will be a magical home, sprung up like a mushroom overnight, like a house in a fairy tale. Now what sort of Mr. Uncle am I, Naomi? Now what about Uncle Erasmus, faithful Ancient?"

I don't know what made us do it, and we hadn't even so much as glanced at each other, but we each took a hand and put it to our brow in a funny, grateful gesture, like savages with topknots on their heads in an old woodcut in a second-hand book.

"And now, breakfast!" said Uncle Erasmus. "You have breakfasted, Jeremy?"

"No, sir, Uncle Erasmus, but I couldn't eat anything."

"For he on honeydew hath fed and drunk the milk of paradise," said Uncle Erasmus. "It seems even now in moments of emotion I fall back on my books. Nevertheless, you will come in with me, and we shall see what Miss McGregor can whip up. People, I believe, think her gruff, but I find her quite a dear in her own way. She would not let babes in the wood starve to death, I'm sure. Particularly valuable babes. How very oddly you shaved this morning, Jeremy. It looks as if you'd been in quite a rush. Come, follow me."

He went ahead and hand in hand again we followed him, and I saw the muscles rippling under the brown skin of his broad back, and the narrowness of his hips beneath the towel, and the easy confidence of his tread, as if the earth was his and God walked with him, and I knew I never could be a man like Uncle Erasmus, but I swore to be as like him as I could be in my own little way, for Naomi's sake.

Her hand nestled in mine, warm and alive and trusting as the little brown hen had that day when she had gone ahead with Davy Hawthorne.

VI

And so Naomi and I were married and dwelt in our fine, fairy-tale house on East Point, seeing the dawns through the years. The little brown hen lived with us to the night she died, quietly, of old age. We found her in the morning, a small bundle of feathers,

BOOK FOUR
THE WORLD—1945

CHAPTER X

I

UNCLE ERASMUS and I strolled back together from his namesake's house, from the home of my son, Erasmus. "Well, boy—well, my Ancient," he said, "how does it feel to be a grandfather at long last?"

"Why, sir, Uncle Erasmus," said I, "it feels fine."

That was the way of things on Quail Island: we used the same form of address after more than a quarter of a century—perhaps because we had always been satisfied with our lives and ourselves—perhaps we dwelt outside time in a sense though the inexorable yet healing river flowed over us just as surely as it did over all mankind. We were not progressive; we did not change. Even that grandmother, my Naomi, still solemnly called Erasmus Quail, Mr. Uncle, and was young again in doing so. Young again? She was always young. A grandmother? How very, very strange!

"I could have wished it sooner," I said.

"Yes, indeed, Ancient," said Uncle Erasmus gravely.

For my boy and Davy Hawthorne's red-headed young scamp, Kathy, had been married five boisterously happy years, and this was their first child. Odd though it seemed it was often thus on Quail Island, even more so nowadays than when we had worried in the long ago.

We left it at that. Uncle Erasmus and I talked more and more without words as we grew older and closer.

Walking through the quiet evening, which was like a hundred hundred others, I felt quickened and more aware than I had been for ages. Holding my boy's little ugly newborn babe in my arms had done that. The proud parents were still arguing about which Irish name they would give

her—for the Murphy blood was strong in Tim's grand-daughter—but the child was my Grace, who'd been little and red and rather querulous like that—Grace, my first-born, who would have been a woman now with a family of her own.

And it seemed to me as I nursed the babe that I was no older than I had been on that other night when Naomi handed me our Grace, and I had held her in a bear's hug, the terror of dropping the fragile mite almost marring my bliss.

That mood persisting, I saw the pines and the parrots and the ever-wheeling seabirds—the familiar and always lovely features of our world—as though I were a youngster again, not encrusted with the shell of years and life which makes us dull, numb creatures, like the crayfish we caught off our rocks, chill-blooded, shut-off, insulated, impervious.

Faces that I had almost forgotten came back to me, and events which time had long smudged near to obliteration were vivid again in my mind's-eye as if they had happened yesterday.

I had no need to say anything of this to my uncle. He knew, as he had always known. And so, in silence, we turned aside and passed through the white picket-gate into God's Acre.

The perpetual snow of the flowers still carpeted the ground, and one of the last fighting survivors of the little brown hens played wary hide-and-seek among the crowded tombstones.

"So many good people here, boy," said Uncle Erasmus. "This has become the city, the capital of Quail Island, and we who remain dwell in the quiet of our sparsely-populated countryside."

It was true enough. In more than forty years since we laid Job Martin, the shoemaker, there every person who had died in our world was buried in that plot of earth, save only Miss Jessie Hawthorne and Jim Pearce and those two Germans. My mother and Dad Barnaby; my daughters, Grace and Mary; my brother Jonathan and his Rosie and the babies they adored; dear old Lord Nelson and his Maggie; the whole tribe of Solomon, save only Eve of the twins; all those fine vigorous red-heads, the Murphy girls and Davy Hawthorne who married the eldest; a host of others—a long list, a long, long list.

And a queer one, too, when one came to think of those who were not in it. Miss Titgens, incredibly old and like a woman made of parchment, lame Mrs. Hawthorne, who had been fifty

years a-dying, Tim Murphy, that great-grandfather who had taken poor care of himself in the wild days of his youth—these and others equally unlikely still escaped the scythe of time and had survived the Great Death.

"I must face it," said Uncle Erasmus, standing there among our dead. "Here in our land of plenty and peace we have grown gentle and soft and very vulnerable. It seems that man needs the buffets and miseries and effort of the world to keep him tough. He may even, it would appear, need danger and dirt and turmoil and germs and disease to call up powers of resistance which otherwise don't develop, like unused muscles. Had we been vaccinated by the needle of everyday life even the Great Death would not have mown down so many of our strongest and best."

I nodded, remembering.

II

The canoe came out of the sunset, the hollowed trunk of a big tree with an outrigger and a tattered sail of brown coconut fibre. She came in so naturally and steadily that we might, indeed, have reached those Friendly Islands for which we had sailed in the schooner *Quail*, and here were some Tongan neighbours on a visit.

Even so we gathered on the beach in doubt and uneasiness, for we had never forgotten those Germans and we feared strangers from the sea. We knew now there was a strong current which set into our bay, and that same current which had brought the boat from the *Stettin* took hold of the canoe and carried her in to the shallows at almost the identical spot where we had found Holtz lying covered with the flag when we came in the red flare of our torches.

That, too, was a warning and an omen.

Yet what could we do?

In the canoe, as in the boat, there were only two people, and they came seeking sanctuary and succour from the cruel sea. They were a native man and woman with frizzy black hair, naked and fevered skeletons in which life still burned. We had remained civilized human beings, Christians—we

could not send them away to perish miserably on the empty waters.

Dad Barnaby was not there to help and advise us. He had broken his leg and fractured his skull in a cliff-fall two days before when he had been trying to rescue a silly sheep which had got itself on to a ledge from whence it could neither go on nor get back. Jonathan looked at these strange patients, but how could he, whose doctoring had consisted mostly of helping at the delivery of babies, have suspected?

Looking back it grows clear that they had been cast out from some other island by a more ruthless tribe, by savage brethren whose instinct guided them to have no mercy where self-preservation was concerned.

We could not guess that at the time.

To Jonathan and to us all they were merely exhausted castaways to be nursed tenderly back to life, though they were not of our race or colour.

We picked them up and carried them with gentle care into our homes and our lives, and it was they who brought the Great Death from beyond the wall of sky and our moat, the sea.

We did not even save their lives.

At first we believed the brown strangers had bequeathed to us nothing more serious than the germs to start an influenza epidemic. That seemed a pity, for we had long been free from such things. Perhaps, indeed, as Uncle Erasmus said, this very freedom made us more susceptible, and the Great Death was nothing more than influenza. Perhaps, too, in the years between, out in the world they had found a cure. We had only the old treatment of staying in bed and sweating end taking hot drinks and keeping out of draughts.

Poor patients after their long immunity, people grumbled and protested as Jonathan went from house to house on his rounds, finding always higher fevers and rising temperatures which nothing he, or Dad Barnaby from his own sick-bed, could bring down.

Then the deaths began.

Not everybody who took the infection died, but most of them did, some in a week, some in a matter of days, some in mere hours. All the happy and placid business of Quail Island stopped, and there was only pain and suffering and sorrow, nursing the sick and digging grave after grave.

The school was turned into a hospital, and we isolated the victims as much as possible but that was very difficult, for the germs seemed to ride as free as thistledown on our pure air.

In a month the worst was over, but Quail Island was never to recover from those bitter thirty days and thirty nights, and for many a year their shadow lay across our little world and all our lives, though Time at last had dulled the sharpness of pain and loss, and we could look back now as at a remembered nightmare.

III

"But the wheel turns and life goes on," said Uncle Erasmus, squaring his broad shoulders which the years could not bend. "You, who lost much, have gained a grand-daughter to-day, and old Tim Murphy, who lost more, has another Murphy red-head to plague and delight him. I could wish there was some rum left. That rascal and I should toast this great day. He had a fine appreciation of rum."

We laughed together. It was the only time he had ever admitted openly that he knew Tim Murphy's guilty secret.

"Rum," mused my uncle, towering among the tombstones; "yes, I could use a glass of rum. Quite a number of glasses. A hogshead of rum. Perhaps my blood grows thinner. Do you find me senile, boy?"

"No, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said with absolute honesty. "To me you don't seem to have changed in any way that matters since you made me your powder-monkey."

"A cheering answer," he said. "I like that answer. You always had the makings. But we have grown together, you and I, Ancient, and that makes all the difference. Still, I do not complain. I age well enough, well enough. But not having had a drop of the stuff since I can remember, it is odd that I should suddenly hanker for rum. Very rum! Come, boy, once you laughed heartily at my jokes."

"I am laughing, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, and I was, for even the feeblest jest seemed funny to me when spoken out of my uncle's great beard where silver threads ran now, which seemed quite right there.

"I have no rum. There it is. And yet I still keep my

simple faith in miracles, Ancient. I affirm to you, boy, that should the Lord so will it, out of the infinite kindness of His heart, I shall have rum again here on Quail Island. Is that impossible, boy?"

"Why, no," I said, "nothing is impossible."

"You progress a little," he said. "Once admit the impossible is possible and you have the beginning of Faith." He turned fiercely on me. "Do you think me blasphemous, boy, to link rum with miracles?"

"I think it's a bit quaint, but very typical, Uncle Erasmus, sir," I said.

"You have not lost the habit of speaking truth to me," he said. "I like you for that habit. Come with me and eat dinner. Here is one evening at least when your doting Naomi will barely notice your absence. And first we shall have some music for old times' sake."

My uncle's big, one-roomed house had mellowed and matured, but it still stood firm and solid, and I was reminded of how wise he had been in those early days to insist that we should build well and truly, not for to-day but for the future. Having called through to the detached kitchen at the back that I was a guest for supper, he settled down with his banjo, which was very old and worn now but still gave out melody sweet to his ears and dear to mine. His big fingers plucked the strings with no more cunning than they had ever had, and his voice remained most unlike Mr. Caruso's, but the zest and gusto were not abated.

Listening to him, strumming with my fingers in rhythm to the familiar airs, I felt happy and still very young, so that when Miss McGregor bustled in and busied herself with the table without intruding on us, without being there for all her sturdy body, it came as quite a surprise that Miss McGregor should be herself and not her mother, that other Miss McGregor who had served Uncle Erasmus so well and who had provided Quail Island with what might have been a great scandal.

Whilst he played "Old Black Joe"—so badly—I studied him with fond regard, recalling his wisdom and understanding that afternoon before this Miss McGregor who was laying the table had been born.

IV

In answer to my uncle's summons Miss McGregor had come into the room, such a big-boned, gaunt, morose woman that I could well imagine she had once been a wardress in a woman's prison as some hinted. She was the last person one would have expected to cause a scandal, yet there the scandal was so clear to see that it could no longer be overlooked. The only person who did not seem to mind was Miss McGregor. She must have known now what my uncle's business was with her, but she looked calm and strong and passive, as if nothing were amiss and she was merely there to get her orders for the day. A kind of primitive serenity rested on her. She had been singing one of her little, plaintive, reedy songs when she heard my uncle call her. She seemed to be singing it still.

"Sit down, Miss McGregor," he said. "Sit down, please, do."

He was embarrassed and paced the big room. I sat quiet in the corner wishing he had not insisted on my presence.

"Nay," said Miss McGregor calmly, "I am just as comfortable on ma feet, Erasmus Quail."

Uncle Erasmus brushed up his moustache, and tugged the prongs of his great beard and cleared his throat.

"This is a difficult matter, Miss McGregor," he said, looking anywhere but at her, as if rehearsing a speech in her absence. "Very difficult. But I must do my duty. I must question you, Miss McGregor. Pay no heed to the youngster. He is my second self."

"Jeremy?" said Miss McGregor. "Why should I be heeding yon laddie?"

"Exactly! Exactly!" said my uncle. "I want to know, Miss McGregor, and I ask the question in warmest sympathy and friendship, what I can do to help you in your trouble?"

"Ma trouble?" said Miss McGregor, puzzled.

Uncle Erasmus cleared his throat.

"I am your friend and deeply in your debt for all the years you have given me, Miss McGregor," he said. "But come, you are not a bit of a girl. We are still civilized and Christian people, and you have not an enemy. No one shall throw the first stone; no one would wish to do so. But we must face it now. You are an unmarried lady, and you are in trouble."

"No, no, Erasmus Quail, I'm no in trouble, though I'm glad ye ha' brought the subject up or I needs must ha' done so m'sel'," said Miss McGregor, looking happy and cunning at the same time like a dear old horse that has eaten a lump of sugar. "Trouble, nay! For the first time in ma whole life I am completely happy with the task o' caring for you and now the delight o' the bairn coming."

The words were so natural and easy that it was obvious she spoke plain truth. There was a dignity about her, too. My uncle was able to stop his pacings and stand before her.

"You're a strange woman, Miss McGregor," he said, and it was a tribute.

"I am a woman," said Miss McGregor, rejecting the adjective.

"With the bairn coming," said my uncle, "isn't it about time you were married, Miss McGregor?"

She held up work-worn hands in dismay.

"Married? Me? The guid Lord forbid. Ha' not I enough on ma mind wi' you and the wee bairn needing all ma love and care without cluttering ma life?"

My uncle peered at her with his hawk look.

"Miss McGregor," he said, "I'll have no man on Quail Island play fast and loose with you. You have been a boon and a blessing to me, you have saved me from a thousand complications. I don't know where I should have been without you. Above all, you are a good woman. I am yours to command. I will, I say, have no man having his pleasure of you, and then——"

Miss McGregor interrupted him with a laugh like a mocking neigh.

"Hark at the puir soul," she said. "The vanity of the creatures! The obtuseness! Erasmus Quail, dinna fash yeself. The puir mannies had no pleasure o' me, guid Lord help him, nor I o' him, but we sowed a great ultimate satisfaction. Under ma rough ways I ha' a heart and a mind. I am a Scot. One day I shall grow old and lay me doon and dee, but now it is fine to think there'll be flesh o' ma' flesh still on this planet. You should understand that wi' all yuir haverings on the subject."

"I do, indeed I do," said Uncle Erasmus, quite abashed.

"And rest content yuirself, Erasmus Quail, for the noo

there'll be a lassie to look after you, you puir lone man, when I am gone, for I shall train her so. You will live a century. Not me. But ma daughter will be caring for you when yuir five score year and ten and in yuir dotage."

Uncle Erasmus had to smile, and fondly, and I smiled in the same fashion, for it seemed to me that of all of us who loved my uncle nobody loved him better than Miss McGregor.

"And if your bairn proves to be a boy?" he asked.

"She will be a girl. This is Miss McGregor's bairn with only as much father as was a biological necessity."

I was surprised to hear Miss McGregor, who spent her life in a kitchen, talking like that, but then as she had said with quiet pride, she was a Scot and they are queer folk who seem to get a better education and have more individuality than ordinary English people.

"So you insist on being our first unmarried mother?"

"If ye put it so, Erasmus Quail."

"And you won't tell even me the father's name?"

"Not even you. Never!" said Miss McGregor with utter finality.

Uncle Erasmus considered.

"Very good," he said. "I cannot make you. And, but for the effect on our general morals, I suppose it would make little odds if I had read a marriage service over you."

"I grant you a point there, Erasmus Quail," said Miss McGregor. "It wouldna' do at all as a general thing, for where would it end? The liberty you bought us here must not degenerate into licence. But I am na the general thing. I am the queer exception you must find in every world. As for the father, I am eternally obliged to him—mark that word, eternally, Erasmus Quail—for he had no love for me and no joy from me, and yet out of the guidness of his heart he risked the peril of yuir wrath and the wrath of this narrow village. I respect him and honour him for that."

Uncle Erasmus looked up into the darkness of the high roof. I had seen his head flung back like that so often in a moment of decision.

"Yes," he said, "and I respect and honour him, too, no matter who he is."

"Thank you, Erasmus Quail," said Miss McGregor, "though knowing you as I do I had no fears. You are a truly guid

man, and ma daughter will be as happy to serve you as I am. And you will stop the silly, wagging, idle tongues, Erasmus Quail, even though they wouldna worry me?"

"I will stop them," my uncle promised, "though I think they will understand of their own accord, for we are good folk here, Miss McGregor, good folk."

"Ay," said Miss McGregor, "but guid folk are not always kind when a body has different views from theirs, and treads her own path. But I ken you will guide them aright, and I ha' no fears, and I hope this personal business of mine won't mean an upset for you, as, indeed, I intend to see it won't, any more than I can help."

"I am sure of that, Miss McGregor," said Uncle Erasmus, "and I'm sure, too, that this bairn of yours will be bonny."

"Ha' no doubt o' that, Erasmus Quail," said Miss McGregor, "she'll be bonny, even though outside she'll look just like me, puir sweet lamb. But bonnie she'll be, Erasmus Quail. And noo I must see to yuir dinner."

And, indeed, the babe was bonny though she grew up to look very like her mother who was taken in the Great Death.

Uncle Erasmus saw to it that our eyes were opened, and we loved Miss McGregor for her own sake and for the sake of her mother, Miss McGregor. They were grand, good women, strange and apart and dedicated to selfless service, like saints in their own peculiar way.

V

The moon was rising as I strolled home from my uncle's, and the quiet world was flooded with white beauty. I felt tranquil and happy, and still rather lost in the long river of our yesterdays which ran now through sunshine, now through shadow, so that sometimes I was powder-monkey again aboard the schooner, and sometimes Naomi, Jonathan and Davy and I were playing together as children without an inkling of all that lay ahead, or we had just moved into the fine new house which had sprung up like a mushroom on East Point, a young bride and groom as deeply in love as we were to-day, or again Naomi was turning to me all tragedy in her dear, brown face as we faced the awful knowledge that the Great Death which

had taken our first-born was also going to claim her little sister, Mary.

Such a host of memories, gay and grim, and yet one would have said that life in a lost Eden like Quail Island would have been, for all its charms, somewhat too colourless and uneventful.

When I reached East Point the moon had ridden higher and the sea was a wide plain of glittering diamonds which stretched away from our front garden to the rim of the empty world. I stood watching the scene with deep delight, recalling how Naomi had known always that this was the place for us.

I had no need to call her name. She wasn't home yet. I had known that when I was a hundred yards away. I always knew. When she wasn't in it the house was just an empty box of wood without a soul.

After a space I went on to the verandah, sat down in my big chair, and filled the pipe gnarled old Petersen had made for me. I did so in pleasant anticipation, for my palate had grown less dainty than it had been in boyhood and now I enjoyed the mixture of dried herbs which served us as tobacco, and had even gained some cunning as a blender. I lit a spill at the small fungus-brazier which was always kept burning, and puffed away, a big, heavy middle-aged man to whom life had dealt hard knocks and also brought great happiness.

Presently I tapped out the ashes from my pipe and laid it aside, for I knew that Naomi was coming and I felt specially tender towards her that night as if it was she who had just had a baby. Rising, I went to the head of the steps and she came running lightly out of the moonlight and into my arms.

"Jeremy," she said, "it seems centuries." And she kissed me eagerly with her happy mouth. "But I couldn't get away sooner. Willie Wise told me you were at Mr. Uncle's so I knew you'd be all right. And I've really been quite useful. There was a lot to do. Kathy's a sweet thing, but she's harum-scarum and, though she'd vowed she had everything ready, she really was in a fearful muddle. Or, I should say, a happy muddle. She's a Murphy all right, bless her. The baby's perfect. She'll be beautiful. Our grand-daughter, Jeremy, isn't it silly?"

Our grand-daughter. And here was Naomi in my arms, her body still as firm and smooth as a sapling, her mouth

laughing on mine as it had in the kitchen of The Nunnery, bright little tears of delight sparkling in the moonlight on her clean-cut cheeks.

"Granny Quail!" I said.

"Grandpa Quail! Old Grandpa!" She was Namy again, being impish.

I scooped her up in my arms, and all we had been through together had not changed her for me. She was still the girl in boy's clothes who was always so much a girl, still lithe and light and crisp and wise—a little girl with pigtails tied with string and huge grey eyes, fearless and funny. Granny Quail!

I marched back with her to my chair and sat down, and she rested in my arms with a little sigh of content as if we had been parted for endless time.

"Nice," she said, "I've missed you. Oh, very nice! One more thing about the baby, Jeremy, and then we'll just be us and together. They've been arguing all day—you'd have thought from Kathy's energy the child was a year old—and they've finally decided, after going through all the names you've ever heard of, on Moira."

"Moira?" I said, "Moira? Yes, I like that."

"So do I, darling," said Naomi. "Though I hardly dared to say so, in case I started them all over again."

I was conscious of a vague disappointment, but when I realized its source I was happy again.

"No," I said, "for the moment I was surprised and hurt they hadn't called her after you. I'm glad they didn't want to. There can only be one Naomi forever and ever."

"Cherub! Cherubim!" Though her words teased, her lips told me how moved she was by this simple and obvious truth—a truth so simple and obvious that I'd hardly bothered to say it.

I suppose husbands, even the fondest, are often like that. They know what they know and it seems unnecessary to put it into words.

"Granny and Grandpa," I said presently, "cuddling here in the moonlight like a couple of lovebirds. And all because Granny's a hussy."

"And Grandpa's a bold and gallant powder-monkey," said Naomi, "and always will be, thank God!"

I was reminded of that other night when Uncle Erasmus

and I had called at our house on our way to poor Jim Pearce and my mother had given me the mutton chop. It had struck me as touching and beautiful that she and Dad Barnaby, who seemed old as the hills, should be holding hands. They were our age then, or thereabouts, Lord save us!

I recalled it to Naomi. Of course, I had told her before. I had told Naomi everything.

She listened again, stroking my hair, and then sat upright on my knee, and her face went suddenly wise and older as it always could even when she had come to us in the sugar sack.

"Jeremy," she said, "I've been wanting to say this for a long time, and here it is. You're looking back too much."

"Too much?" I said, puzzled.

"Far too much. Everything reminds you of something that's passed and gone. You're beginning to think and talk like an old man sitting in the sun with all his living behind him."

"Yes, I see what you mean," I said uneasily, for in the face of my mood all day I couldn't attempt a denial. It would have been no use, anyway. Perhaps I am a very simple person, or Naomi, in her own way, had my uncle's faculty for knowing everything. There was certainly nothing about me which could be hidden from those grey eyes.

"You're not an old man, and I'm not an old woman, even if we were grannies twenty times over, which I wish we were." She paused a moment at that, paused a breath, for even she could not escape from the past. "I don't blame you, Jeremy," she went on softly, and now she was stroking my hair again. "I find myself doing it. Something has gone wrong with this island and our lives here. We need new blood, and I don't mean just an occasional baby like sweet Moira. We need new interests from outside. Oh, I know, my dear, that all the bad things have come from outside, but perhaps we needed even them. It isn't right that a couple like us, barely in the prime of life, should always be looking back over our shoulders. The future should be our concern, as Uncle Erasmus said it would be when he gave us East Point, facing all the dawns."

"Moira is the future," I said.

"Yes, but that's not enough, though I thank God for it. I've always been wise for just a girl, haven't I, Jeremy?"

"So wise!"

"I don't have to think things out. They just happen into my head. They always have. Miss Jessie Hawthorne—oh, thousands of things. And though I can't make out what it is, I know there is something wrong, and unless we can find the remedy we're going to run on to a sidetrack leading to a dead-end here on dear Quail Island."

"Naomi," I asked, startled, "have you been talking to Uncle Erasmus?"

"If you mean about this, I've not breathed a word to Mr. Uncle."

"Then that makes it all the stranger. He knows things are amiss, too. He was saying to me to-day he could use a hogshead of rum."

"Rum?" echoed Naomi, and her clear brow crinkled momentarily. Then her smile came back, and her eyes shone with amusement and understanding. "The sweet wise old sinner," she said. "And, this is very important, Jeremy, does he think he will get it?"

"You know how he is, Namy," I said. "It doesn't occur to him the matter might be beneath the notice of Providence. His God is a very personal, kindly being, very much the indulgent Father."

"Mr. Uncle's God is the only kind worth having," said Namy. "I've always known that."

"Yet he calls you his little pagan."

"We understand that joke," she said. "A little pagan can get along very well with Mr. Uncle's God. And he said he would get his rum?"

"He said if it was so willed a miracle would bring it to him."

"Hooray!" cried Naomi. "I believe with him. I believe he will get his rum, and that the rum is much more important than an old backwoodsman like you imagines, and that there's nothing more for us to worry about and in some fashion Quail Island is going to be saved. Hooray, Jeremy, hooray!"

And she was off my knee and doing her little skipping dance of glee as if she had at that moment broken Miss Jessie Hawthorne's witching. So there I was muddling the present up with the past again, but that didn't seem to matter so much now that Naomi was dancing because Uncle Erasmus was going to get his rum.

Hurrying light footsteps brought us both to the verandah rail. Aunt Grace stood below, out of breath, distressed.

"Naomi! Jeremy!" she said, "I know—busy day—but please come. It's Titgens. At my age I should—know better than to be scared—but I loved her. Come, please!"

We hurried after her, down through the trees under the moon's snow, and along by the rippling silver stream, and branched off to the Nunnery.

"I'd stayed late at the school, and it was such a lovely evening that I strolled on the beach. When I got back I thought she was abed, for the house was quiet. So quiet. Before I started to undress I thought I'd go in and make sure she was comfortable. She was comfortable, my dears; she was dead."

By the light of a single candle, hurriedly set down at a crooked angle, Miss Titgens sat in a wicker basket chair covered with chintz from which the pattern of bright flowers had faded into ghostly outlines. She looked frail and white and empty as a small shell washed up on the shore. Her thin, almost transparent hands, which had always been so busy, held a piece of sewing with the needle still in it. Miss Titgens had finished her long journey which had begun on a Sydney tram when Uncle Erasmus paid the tuppenny fare she hadn't had in her worn purse.

VI

The hour was late afternoon again, mild and gentle, the sun dropping down the clear, blue west.

Uncle Erasmus and I had been studying the vital statistics of Quail Island as recorded in the big register.

"Odd, very odd," he said, "and yet who was to have foreseen the Great Death? That upset everything. But we must not grumble or question, Ancient. He works in a mysterious way——! The fact remains that few of the handful of adults left are breeding stock, and the youngsters growing up all tend to in-breeding. Despite what your Aunt Grace said on one occasion you may remember, I never regarded Quail Island as a stud farm. I called only those it seemed right to call, necessary to call. No one in their ordinary senses would have

called—just one instance at random—Miss Titgens, but I called her, and much good came of it, for she was a most valuable and worthy piece in the jigsaw of our life. But not a brood mare, as your Aunt Grace said that afternoon. And I do not like in-breeding. The Egyptian kings married their sisters, and where are they to-day, boy? I ask you, where are they to-day?"

"Gone from the face of the earth centuries ago, and all their courts and pomp, also, Uncle Erasmus, sir," I said.

"You see?" he said. "God forbid that it should come to that on Quail Island—brother marrying sister—abominable, boy! But it will come to something like that here, unless there is a change."

It was nice, just for once, to know something Uncle Erasmus didn't know.

"You haven't, Uncle Erasmus, sir," I asked, quite needlessly, "been talking to my wife?"

"To that pagan chit?" said my uncle, glowering. "Why should I talk to her on matters of state?"

"Only she thinks exactly the same as you do," I said.

Uncle Erasmus tugged his beard and tossed up his moustache.

"Come now, that's interesting," he said. "Extremely interesting. And what else does she think, Ancient?"

"She is only a pagan, sir, but she thinks you will get your rum."

"Rum, boy, rum? What are you talking of?" His vast face wrinkled into a million weather-worn valleys, and he slapped his knee. "I knew that first day you brought her to my cabin she was the girl for you," he said. "'This little one will take a lot of killing,' or some such I said when your lovelorn heart cried out that she was dead, when she had merely fainted from sheer exhaustion. One can be dead, Ancient, and still alive. Many more than one would suppose are in that condition. But your Namy will never be one of them. Come, this is good. The pagan, too, believes in miracles?"

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said.

"Then indeed we progress and new doors open. Yes, indeed."

And at that moment, just like turning back a page in a

book or seeing a moving picture a second time, Aunt Grace stood there at the top of the steps twirling her silly little parasol against the sunset.

Our clothes had grown rougher and cruder as time went by. When Mr. Solomon and Solly and all his tribe save only Eve were taken by the Great Death, one of the sailors who had come back to us with Lord Nelson became our tailor though he had little art and was working on difficult material. It was the same with the ladies. They had no silks or satins left, no cotton or voiles, but only our homespun wool. Miss Titgens followed the fashions as well as she could, and gave a lead, but, though the costumes seemed all right to us, coming to them gradually as the real things wore out, they must have been very peculiar, I don't doubt.

Now Aunt Grace stood there, against the sunset as she had on that other evening, wearing the selfsame frock and hat, twirling the same silly little sunshade. I should have said it was witchcraft, but for the fact that my Aunt Grace had always been the loveliest of all ladies, and the ladies are very clever, particularly when they are lovely in Aunt Grace's fashion.

I was touched and awed to think of the care and wisdom and foresight that had gone into the preservation, through all that had happened, of those few yards of silk and bits of kickshaws that worked such magic.

For that mysterious thing Time was defeated, and there stood Aunt Grace just as she had on that other page, at least to our eyes which were not accustomed to seeing ladies in party dresses.

With the aid of those few yards of silk and the kickshaws she didn't look a day older. Her face was still old ivory and when her full lips smiled—her lips I had kissed and found like a rose—her teeth still looked sparkling and bright as if she had been biting an apple. I admit that we who looked at her in amazement were just as much older and so our eyes were prejudiced in her favour, but I swear she was still my Aunt Grace. The day Mr. Paterson died he had said she was a Dresden china figure. She looked more than ever like that, and Dresden china does not grow old. It stands outside time. You could never associate birthdays with Aunt Grace.

"Well, Erasmus," said Aunt Grace, dropping him a bit

of a curtsy as lightly as if she were still a girl, "history repeats itself, or stands still."

"Grace—my dear Grace!" gasped Uncle Erasmus, shaken quite out of himself by this vision, and I would be the last to blame him. "Grace! Come in! Sit down! This chair!"

He was on his feet, bumbling about as if he were Lord Nelson.

"I am well enough here, Erasmus," said Aunt Grace, against the sunset.

And, in truth, she was.

"'Pon my soul, Grace," said Uncle Erasmus, "you've quite taken my breath away."

Aunt Grace was enjoying herself. She sparkled.

"Oh, fie, Erasmus," she said, "I could have done that back in nineteen-fourteen if I hadn't been so fond of you and so full of admiration, and if there hadn't been more important matters to attend to first."

"I believe you could, Grace," said Uncle Erasmus, still not himself at all. "Yes, Grace, I believe you could."

"You do well to believe truth, Erasmus," said Aunt Grace, so boldly, like the cheeky young lady she looked to us though she was over fifty.

"I have never denied your charms, Grace, my dear," said Uncle Erasmus, trying to be himself again and tower up. "Didn't I once ask you to marry me?"

He had thought that quite a smart speech, easy and ironical as old friends could be, but the moment he'd said it I knew that my Aunt Grace had put the very words into his mouth.

"Why, yes, Erasmus," she said. "You did. And I've come now to thank you for that great compliment, and accept you."

"Good for you, Aunt Grace!" burst out of me before I could stop it.

She shook her small head at me, and no woman of over-fifty ever looked lovelier. No, not Helen of Troy.

"Hush, powder-monkey," she said. "You are only an eye-witness, our historian. I set you free long, long ago. Don't you remember?"

I remembered all right, and I was surprised to find myself blushing like the boy I had been by the laughing stream.

"Now that dear Titgens has gone," said Aunt Grace,

forgetting me, "I am ready, Erasmus. I could never have left her alone at The Nunnery. My son is grown up and I am thrice a grandmother, and so at last I am ready, and, most fortunately, for never in your life before have you needed me as at this moment. And what is more, Erasmus, I have the permission of both the Miss McGregors."

"Both?" said Uncle Erasmus blankly.

"Oh, yes, naturally," said Aunt Grace. "I arranged all this with Miss McGregor the First when I assisted at the delivery of her daughter. She thought it was lovely idea and kissed me. Miss McGregor has kissed me, too, when we talked it over. What have you to say to that, Erasmus?"

"Why, ma'm, why, Grace," stammered Uncle Erasmus, waving his great hands about, "only that—only what Jeremy here and I have always known—that you are—that you are a woman without a peer. A unique lady! A pearl of price!"

Aunt Grace glowed against the glowing sky.

"Not a brood mare, I'm afraid, Erasmus," she said, "but I think you'll find that there's still some femineity left after the long years of being a mother and a schoolma'm." She twirled her little parasol. "In fact I think I may claim that you are in for the happiest surprise of your life, Erasmus."

I had never seen my uncle blush before. I didn't think a man of his age, with beard and all could blush—least of all Uncle Erasmus. But his face was scarlet.

He looked much younger than the day I had seen him against the sunset after we had sailed through Sydney Heads.

"By Peter and all the tinkers," he swore, "you're right, too—damnably right. This is fine, this is fun! I grew old and set. I grew crabbed. You break the walls down with a touch of your finger; you set me free. Grace, I need you now, I crave you. Ma'm, will you marry me?"

"Why, yes, Erasmus," said Aunt Grace, "that is the happy business which brought me here this afternoon."

Uncle Erasmus passed his hand across his face in a daze.

"Boy," he said to me, fiercely, "what are you doing here, gaping, gloating?"

"I'm sorry, sir, Uncle Erasmus——"

"But Jeremy had to be here," Aunt Grace interposed. "Tell me, Jeremy, what with one thing and another, don't

you think I've done better than if I'd married the Commercial Bank, and played for safety?"

"I don't have to answer that, Aunt Grace," I said, "but I can tell you that this is a happy moment for your friend, Mary, my mother."

"Always faithful, always dependable, Jeremy," said Aunt Grace, and she was mightily pleased.

"Are you marrying me, ma'm, or my Ancient?" asked Uncle Erasmus. "Go, boy, bring me a rum, and if you can't do that, then let us at least have privacy."

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, and scurried off to tell Naomi, but out of the corner of my eye I saw Aunt Grace drop her silly little parasol and run to my uncle on her tiny, quick feet like a radiant schoolgirl to her sweetheart.

VII

We were out in the boat—Murphy, Petersen, Willie Wise, Paterson and I. It was one of those heavy, humid afternoons when the air presses on your skull and the fish bite freely, though I have never been able to understand why the fish down there in the shadowy depths should know what kind of a day it is up above. Still, we always found that in such weather we had our biggest hauls, and the bottom-grating was a shining mass of schnapper and flounders and gurnard and all manner of others, flipping and flapping and dying, losing their bright colours and flashing life, turning into to-night's supper and to-morrow's breakfast.

I rebaited my hooks and flung the line over again.

The island lay as I had seen it so often, but now the smoke rose from fewer chimneys of the toy cabins, and even away out there, remote, looking at our home as if it were a Noah's Ark scene, it seemed to me you could sense that something was amiss as compared with the brave days. But that may have been only my imagination, or because I knew.

Frank Paterson and I were up in the bows, a bit apart from the others. We had been talking quietly about his mother's engagement to Uncle Erasmus, and I was glad to find he was as happy about it as I was.

Cricket and sudden death had not interfered with the advent of Dominie Paterson's son, who so easily might not have been born at all and who arrived nine months after his father had been murdered. Aunt Grace had been quietly and gravely determined about that. He was a fine fellow now, and had always been worthy of his breeding, with something of the lovable, scholarly quality of old skin-and-bones blended with the delicacy and fineness of Aunt Grace. He was a great reader, and yet he did well in Deliverance Day sports, and excelled in all the practical affairs of our life on Quail Island.

It had always been my hope, from the first day I saw him, a bit of a thing in Aunt Grace's arms, her face radiant and rich as she offered him for inspection, that he would marry my daughter.

When Naomi, in turn, handed to me our baby girl, whom we were to christen Grace, it seemed almost inevitable. I said as much to Naomi and she smiled and suddenly wept, though even she couldn't have known then, surely?

For, of course, it was not to be.

Perhaps it wouldn't have happened, anyway. What parents hope and what children do are very different matters. It may well be that had Grace grown to be a great beauty, as she promised, she would have meant nothing to Frank Paterson, nor he to her. Love does odd things.

Anyway, as life had gone, Frank had married the last of all the Solomons, the sole survivor. It seemed right in a way, too, that he should marry Eve, Adam's twin, the first little girl who had been born on Quail Island, his mother's godchild, the one Uncle Erasmus had named that day on the poop in the big conch-shell and who had looked at us with such great, dark eyes, even as a little new-born infant.

There was a queer thing, too!

Mr. Solomon, the tailor, and his wife were the most ordinary couple, and so were all their children, even Solly, though he was good at the one-step and music. All dead and gone, but they themselves would have been the first to admit that they were just a plain Jewish family and very fortunate to dwell in the Promised Land.

But Eve, whom the Great Death spared, was not ordinary at all.

Remembering her parents as I did so clearly, and the more

clearly the older I grew, I could never look at her without blinking, dazzled by wonder. For Eve, the daughter of Mr. Solomon, the tailor, was Balkis, Queen of Sheba. Not the Queen of Sheba the Royal Academy painters imagined, all breast-plates and dignity and flowing skirts and dead as a tailor's dummy, but alive and vital and burning and wild and quick, bright yet dark like a panther.

I don't know how she came to happen to little, affable, humble, almost servile Mr. and Mrs. Solomon, but she did. It was as if, by some odd chance, all the beauty and strangeness of their Eastern race, lost so often, smothered and smirched so often, had burned up in a bright and golden flame. Though why this to them, of all people, just that night when they happened to go to bed together, I do not profess to guess, unless it might be that their ancient blood told them they would soon be, at long last, on their way to the Promised Land, and Eve, their daughter, would be named with all the pomp of a princess.

Against even that explanation there is the fact that Adam, her twin brother, was the most commonplace little Jewish apprentice you could imagine.

There is no explaining it, but Eve Paterson, the mother of three children, was still Sheba and had not run to fat or settled down into maternity as such an Eastern girl might well have done. Aunt Grace was proud of her daughter-in-law, and rightly. I think she loved her, too, in a rather frightened way. Eve was infinitely more beautiful than Kathy Hawthorne whom my Erasmus had married. Kathy was just a wild Irish red-head. Of course, there had never been any real question of him marrying Eve, for he was born much later.

Sucking at my pipe, back in the past again and mixing it up with the present, it seemed to me that things had worked out very well, even though Kathy was a madcap girl, and they lived a life as jolly and tumbled as Jonathan and Rosie had, with enough noise around their house to scare the parrots away, and more than ever now.

We were busy with our lines and our thoughts.

The matings of Quail Island!—where nobody drifted away or lost touch when they were married, but went on living all their days as members of the one big family.

VIII

Mr. and Mrs. William Smith had been city people who hankered for life in the bush, and that was a strange thing, for most often it is the other way about. He had been a clerk in a warehouse, and when they came into a little legacy they saw their chance. The money wasn't enough to buy a good place, but they thought, being so eager and willing to work, that they could make do with almost anything. They were city people, but they were innocents in the country where the simple farmers are so much shrewder and harder than they look.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith met a dear, funny old hayseed of a fellow who said he had made his pile and wanted to retire to Sydney. He had worked hard and had earned his ease, and his nice little property had provided him with the means. Now he was prepared to sacrifice it, good as give it away, for just the amount they had available. He liked to see young people getting back to the land. He declared that the hand of Providence was in their meeting.

The Smiths bought, gleeful at their good fortune. The season was the best that had been known for a decade, and the bush looked beautiful and it was the time of the singing of the birds.

Soon enough they found that they had acquired a few hundred acres of barren, rocky hills which had never repaid working—acres which the dear old man had taken over a year before in settlement of some trifling debt. If he, indeed, had given them the place he would have been well rid of an encumbrance.

The Smiths were young and keen and full of spirit. Bush fires and droughts beset them, but they toiled harder than any slaves and for that reason the Bank advanced them money on mortgage, not much and warily, seeing that even such a white elephant might be tamed by people like the Smiths. It wasn't much that mortgage—just enough to be a fine millstone round their necks. Their hearts might well have been broken. They fought on with the battle they could not hope to win.

Those hills which spelt ruin for the Smiths might, thought Uncle Erasmus, hold the fortune he sought. He busied himself amongst the rocks, and often in the evening smoked a friendly pipe with the tired young couple who still smiled, though their city skins had been tanned to leather and scored deeply with fatigue.

Soon enough Uncle Erasmus learnt that he, too, was wasting his time there, and he shouldered his heavy swag and tramped away.

But because he remembered with his heart, not just his mind, he did not forget the Smiths, when, three years later, he made the Daybreak strike.

He took a special journey out into the backblocks to gather up the Smiths and their baby, and the Bank took over a much-improved property though they really didn't want it at any price.

Uncle Erasmus could have paid the mortgage, of course. He preferred the idea of letting the Bank have that farm on its hands. He chuckled over the joke.

The Smiths had been among the wise and happy people who loved Quail Island from the moment they set eyes on it, and asked nothing better than to be left in peace to live their lives of steady work and quiet happiness. Uncle Erasmus saw to it that they had a property worthy of their powers, and they made it a show-place and example.

I remembered their eldest, George, first as a big, moon-faced baby aboard the schooner, who never seemed to cry or give any trouble, but simply beamed at everyone and everything and found life good. He grew into a big, gentle moon-faced lad, into a big, gentle moon-faced man. It was as if all the eager spirit of the Smiths, the desire to be rid of pavements and dealing with the earth and its fruits, came to fulfilment in George. He was a genius in his way. He seemed to know by instinct everything that made a farmer. If an animal was sick to death he had only to lay his hands on it—or so we always said—and the beast began to mend; if an orchard failed to flourish, George Smith could put it right; if a crop were poorly he knew without any text-books what was amiss.

A quiet ox of a fellow, slow-spoken and dreamy except when he was on a job.

The great plans we made for my little half-sister, Ruth. Coming so late in our family life, and so rightly out of the love of Dad Barnaby and my mother, she was treated like a queen. Even Jonathan and Rosie regarded her with something like veneration. We often used to wonder who would ever be good enough to marry her when she grew up, canvassing this possibility and that, but usually deciding that Ruth was so special that so-and-so would hardly do, or that such-and-such might develop in a worth-while manner, but at the moment——!

From the time she was a golden-haired doll of a schoolgirl Ruth never had eyes for any man save George Smith, who in those days was all knees and elbows and lounging, awkward, immature strength.

Don't ask me what she saw in him, the dear old ox.

Whatever it was it sufficed.

They were married, and even the Great Death did not intrude on George Smith's home where all living things grew and flourished, including four tow-headed, sleepy, sturdy children.

IX

Even on Quail Island human nature and sex attraction and all those things remained a source of constant wonder. They weren't simplified by simplifying life.

I got a bite and hauled in.

"A fine lump of a fish and all," said Tim Murphy. "And tell me now, Jeremy, do ye recall the night we buried the barbarous Prussian just about here?"

"I do indeed."

"Poor bait for sharks he'd make even, a ramrod of a thing the like o' him. But those were the days, Jeremy! Mary and Joseph, those were the days! Then I had me health and me strength and me gorgeous family, and here I am now, nothing at all but a great-grandfather, with all me future behind me, as surely as a cow's tail."

"Nonsense, Mr. Murphy," I said, "you're as good a man as ever you were."

And he looked it, for, though his wild hair was silver, his

muscles were strong and his wiry body still exuded a kind of careless natural strength.

"Mr. Murphy he calls me, respectful, though I'm the great-grandfather of his grand-daughter," the smith lamented. "Doesn't that go to show how I've become nothing at all but an unholy relic? Ah, Jeremy, boy, those were the days."

"It's silly to look back at them," I said, remembering the warnings of Uncle Erasmus and Naomi. "To-morrow's our concern."

"Hark at him," mocked Mr. Murphy. "The human echo. He never got that out of his own head at all at all, for his head is as full of the past as mine is, though he's only a bit of a stripling. Will ye recall to yer mind then, Mr. Jeremy Quail, that on the night we buried the Prussian I had a bottle of rum to solace me, and what's more, and a thing ye niver guessed, Erasmus Quail himself put up more for me at the Deliverance Day ball!—will ye recall that now?"

"I recall it well," I said.

"And can ye be after telling me when such high times will come again, me boy-o?"

I was wiser than Tim Murphy though he was a great-grandfather.

"Sooner perhaps than you imagine, me boy-o!" I gave him back.

"Will ye hark at him? Will ye listen to his ravings? Will ye be so kind as to tell——"

But Petersen cut across his ribald speech with his quiet, solemn voice which he used so seldom that he still spoke the strange English he had used when we left Australia.

"Here out here is now no goodt any more," said Petersen. "No goodt. Pleas take look at sky. No goodt."

We had been so occupied that we hadn't noticed, but the air had grown heavier than ever and in the north vast castles of purple cloud had been built and grew up and up as we watched, threatening to crash down on us in an avalanche.

"Mother o' God," gasped Tim Murphy, "I have not seen a sky the like o' that since we lost our mast in the *Quail*. Blessed Patrick, would you have us all drowned dead entirely while ye're argufying and waggin' yer great jaws? Row as ye niver have before, ye useless articles, if it's Quail Island you'd wish to set foot on iver, iver again."

We rowed, be sure of that, toiling feverishly at the long sweeps and driving the heavy boat, while the castles became Himalayas and the world held its breath.

X

Never in all our history had there been such a sky. It seemed to threaten the end of the world. We were not content to make the boat fast to its usual moorings, but dragged the heavy craft up the beach, sweating and cursing and panting, and lodged it snugly among the pines, tying it by stout lines to their trunks. It was strange to be working with such feverish energy in the tremendous hush, but we were not alone in fearing what was to come. The seabirds, after wild and whirling councils, vanished from the heavy air, seeking shelter, no doubt, in caves and crannies in the cliffs.

"Glory be," said Tim Murphy, "if they regard it so—they wild, free craytures—the like of us should be making our homes snug as niver before."

The parrots chattered in awed tones, and the cicadas were silent for once. Cattle lowed uneasily as they filed down from the higher places tossing their horns, and even the silly sheep were making for the valleys, baaing fear. The pines stood still and rigid, waiting; the sea rested on the beach like a sheet of lead.

We tumbled our catch, willy-nilly, into baskets without bothering to sort or divide, or arrange to which cabins shares should be taken. We knew they might never be eaten at all, and were not worth a moment's delay, but being fishermen we could not bear to leave them behind. That would have been against nature.

Then with brief partings we hurried off on our various ways. I had the longest journey to go out to East Point, but though I ran as if competing in a Deliverance Day race I could not bring myself to throw my heavy basket into the bushes.

And when I got home I found Naomi had done all that was possible to make our cabin into a little fort. The open sides had been lowered and locked in place, doors were bolted, movables had been stowed and the verandah cleared. That

was like Naomi, and had I paused to think I should have known she would have done so. But I was glad I had not paused, for she awaited me outside, face and hair damp with exertion, and the joy and relief which lit her up was a fine sight to see.

"Jeremy," she said, "I thought you might still be out in the boat!"

I was too winded to talk for the moment, but I took her in my arms, and in doing so forgot to worry about the realization that I was no longer young Jeremy Quail but Grandpa Quail who could be knocked out by a mile or so cross country.

The view from East Point was a never-ending joy: at that moment it made us shiver. The cloud castles had tumbled down into a dust of purple gloom which filled the air and rested on a sea the colour of pewter. Behind us the sun was setting, but it had been smudged into a kind of fiery, lost glow. Quail Island seemed no bigger than the schooner in that vast and empty and threatening world, and we were smaller than the chicks of the little brown hens.

We saw the wind afar, before we felt or heard it, raging towards us a wild line of whiteness on the dead sea, frothing and boiling. We ran through the darkness which had come two hours early, and slammed the door behind us and shot the heavy bolts like children who fled from a boggy-man.

A second later, whilst we still stood in the pitch-black room, the wind came with a roar from the sea and a shriek from the pines which deafened our ears, and made the sturdy house reel and quiver as if shaken by an earthquake. It seemed that such a tremendous din could not last, but it went on and on. Through the main roar of sound ran whinings and whistlings as the hurricane found cracks and crevices no ordinary gale had ever revealed. We could not hear ourselves speak, and Naomi had put out the fire among her other precautions. Even could I have found my flint and steel no candle would have burned in this storm-possessed place which we had regarded as our solid, weather-proof home.

Hand in hand, supperless, I in my boat clothes which smelt of fish, we stumbled through the crazy pitch to our big bed, and crawled in between the woollen blankets.

Close in each other's arms we were suddenly snug again.

Remembering how brief had been the testing of the schooner,

we waited for this to pass, but it continued to rage for hour on hour. At intervals a louder crash told of a great pine flung down, and the surf boomed thunderously on East Point, sending thudding showers of spray to beat on walls and roof. After a long space we ceased to marvel and listen, and the clamour, which was loud and violent enough to waken the dead, lulled us into heavy, drugged sleep.

A crash and a rending roar jerked us up out of that pit of quiet into a boiling cauldron of noise and confusion which was bedlam beyond understanding. Our blankets whirled away, and went flapping about like vast bats. Our home had become a wooden box without a lid: the roof had gone. Wan, wild light flooded the room, and salt spray stung our faces.

But at least the day had come. Had it happened in the deeps of night it would have been much worse.

For a moment we clung together in dismay, stunned and bewildered. I put my mouth to Naomi's ear and shouted: "The boy's place! Come on!"—for theirs was the closest house to us and one of the most sheltered on the island. She nodded understanding, and we scrambled across tossed furniture and tumbled belongings to the back door, which burst open the instant I drew the bolt. I held Naomi firm in the curve of my arm, feeling that the wind might whisk her off into the void.

The outside world was as strange and mad as our home had become, fogged with spindrift so that we could only see for a few yards, hammered and tossed by the fury of the wind, tormented. The pines bent down, as if held by giant hands, and branches and mysterious pieces of wreckage whirled above. Bent double, scrambling over fallen trees and obstacles which had not been there yesterday, finding it difficult to draw breath, we fought our way from East Point and through the groaning, swaying columns, over the ridge and down the sharp drop into the deep valley. As we descended the fury of the storm abated, though we could see it still warring above with undiminished violence. And so wind-blown, wet through with sea-water, we came to the cabin, and it was the first time I had ever arrived at a place where one of the Murphy blood dwelt and enjoyed a sense of quietude.

We paused to get our breath.

"It must be quite a blow, Namy," I said; "if the boy's home seems a haven of peace!"

And at that we hugged each other, and kissed and laughed, for nothing mattered except that we were alive and together and had escaped into sanctuary.

Erasmus opened the door for us.

"Why, Mum! Why, Dad!" he said, his grey eyes growing round, "you look as if you'd been shipwrecked."

He saw we were laughing, and was glad to be able to laugh, too, at the picture we made. A good lad, Erasmus, and dearer to us than it would be seemly to say. He took after his mother, thank God! and was light and lithe and nimble, and clever, and though his features were as fine as hers they were good and masculine as a man's should be. Yes, many worse about than our Erasmus.

He drew us in, kissing his mother as he did so.

"Afraid the place is in a bit of a mess," he said.

"Just this once don't apologize," said Naomi. "If you want to see a house in a mess slip up and have a look at ours."

But though the storm passed above them—might all storms continue to do so!—the place was certainly a muddle, with baby's clothes strewn all about and napkins on a line, and open books and some dirty dishes, and Erasmus's things thrown anyway in a corner. There was a reek of frying fish from the kitchen where Tim Murphy could be heard chanting "Kathleen Mavourneen" in the deep yet tinny notes of a cracked bell. The baby lay across its mother's knees, crying with a fine pair of lungs and red in the face from wind, and Kathy herself sat up in bed, all pink and white and red-gold, looking like a delighted, delightful child.

Tim Murphy appeared at the open kitchen door, the bubbling frying-pan in his hand.

"Faith, will ye look at the pair of them?" he bellowed, drowning Moira's mere pipings. "Two drowned rats if ever I saw that same. And I'll wager my last farthing not so much as a roof over their heads! And here are the feckless Murphys snug as bugs in a rug. Ah, Erasmus boy, you did well to throw in your lot with the lucky Irish on whom the blessed saints forever smile. And are ye surprised now to find old Tim himself here so early in the morning? Faith, he knows which side his bread's buttered. With the great wind coming and his bit of fine fresh fish didn't he see that this pigsty was the place for him." He winked; he didn't have to tell

us that his real purpose was to be at hand if the young ones needed him. "Come in here in the privacy of the kitchen where ye can swear to yer heart's content, Jeremy man, and tell us the bad news, though, Mother o' God, it seems you may be lucky to be alive at all at all. I shan't be long now, me darlints, and then we shall all put our feet in the trough, and it'll be the finest, grandest breakfast eaten on Quail Island this black, wild mornin'. Just lave it to Tim Murphy. He's long in the tooth, but he's useful."

XI

For two days and three nights the storm ruled the isle with its rod of iron. There were times when it seemed the normal world would never come back again, and that the howling wind would continue to be ripped from its invisible spools unendingly, but we awoke early in the morning of the third day and it was all over. The bruised and buffeted world drew a long, deep breath and began to recover. The sea still ran in jade mountains, but these, too, died as the bright sun climbed, as if Nature had wearied of violence, and, having exhausted its anger, was repentant and sorry and kind again.

Damage enough, but it did not seem to matter now. The happiness of convalescence worked in everything. Trees uprooted, orchards stripped, crops flattened, live stock killed, cabins, too many of them unoccupied these days, unroofed or blown in—all this could be righted now that the sun had come back and the sky was still and blue.

Poor Mrs. Wise—Willie's mother—had been killed when a pine crashed through the cabin and fell across her bed, but she was the only fatality. Her death tortured Willie, apart from his natural sorrow, for she had wanted to sit up in the other room, but he had persuaded her to go and rest. She rested now, poor soul, and it was vain for Willie to nurse regret.

For the rest we had escaped with a few cuts and bruises.

At first dawn I climbed to my uncle's house, and found him standing at the side, where he was out of sight of passers-by, pouring water over his head from a great wooden bucket.

His bathroom had been blown away, but beyond that and the universal damage to growing things his place had escaped.

I told him our news whilst he dried the big, muscular body which defied the storms of time.

"Ancient," he said, as he drew the towel across his back, "I rely on your discretion for it is not a thing I should wish bruited about—I am not proud of it, boy, yet it is a strange thing that I must tell someone. Boy, I have had the peculiar and unenviable experience of being deadly seasick for endless hours on dry land. A shameful confession, but I have no secrets from you."

"That must have been awful, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said.

"So awful," said Uncle Erasmus, "that for once words fail me."

XII

By noon the tired sea was sound asleep, and the gulls were glad to spread their cramped wings and sail above, and the parrots had straightened their bright feathers and the cicadas harped and the blunt-nosed lizards drowsed on their warm, pink rocks, and Quail Island, despite its scars, was itself again.

Had my little brother Jonathan been with us still he would have been the first to see the stranger.

Without his sharp eyes we all seemed to discover it at the same moment.

A clamour of excited voices rose, some faint and thin and far, and others near and loud—but all pitched on the same note of wonder.

Naomi and I had just finished our meal with Uncle Erasmus, and we three stood outside his house, enjoying the golden stillness.

We saw it, too.

"Look! Look! Look!" we cried, sharing the general chorus, and pointing up and out into the blue along with everyone else.

Away off, high in the sky, was a small block of glittering white which not one of us mistook for a bird. It grew with every instant.

"Flying machine! Flying machine!" piped Namy, dancing up and down as if she were on the schooner.

Uncle Erasmus stood with head flung back, watching, and that look of awe was on his face.

"Boy," he said, "there is the miracle."

"Oh, yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus!" I agreed, and I could feel my heart hammering in schoolboy excitement.

And now, out of that immense silence, came a sound Quail Island and its people had never heard before. It crept into the ear first as a mere vibration, almost unheard, and deepened and became more real with every second until it was a throbbing growl, like the drone of some immense beetle flying through summer heat.

Before we had done more than begin to grasp what was happening the shining, silver thing was roaring over us, and its vast black shadow was sweeping over our hills and valleys like a thunder-cloud across the sun.

Instinctively, we ducked our heads and hunched our shoulders.

Those Germans had told us of aeroplanes, but had never spoken of such a monster as this.

"There is nowhere for them to land," shouted my uncle above the tempest of the engines.

I had forgotten that. Even the tiny things, the glorified kites, which we had known had to come down on big open spaces like racecourses. Our sports ground, which had seemed so fine, was dwarfed by this visitor into a saucer.

The thing swept over, a prehistoric creature beyond wildest imaginings, and seemed to be heading out to sea again, but it curved back, the roar mounting once more, and we knew that something was amiss. That mighty voice had developed a splutter which grew into a choking cough, and the aeroplane was dropping down and down. We saw it must fall into the water of our bay. Immediately everybody began to run from all directions towards the beach, shouting and waving in futile fear and encouragement.

I thought of our boat, hauled up high where we had made her secure. We would never get her launched in time.

The noise snapped off. We lost sight of the aeroplane behind the pines. Everywhere people ran, all racing for the shore.

And when we burst out on to the sands, breathless, terrified, the thing sat quiet and at ease on the still water—a silver

palace turned into a house-boat for a magician's regatta, white and at ease as a swan.

Calmly at anchor!—a ship as big as the schooner *Quail*, a ship which flew through the skies.

People were moving about on her, quite at home, as if all this were normal and everyday. To us they were men from Mars, yet they looked like Baden-Powell's boy scouts, for they wore khaki shorts and shirts.

To greet the world which had flown to us on the wings of a roc from Sinbad the Sailor we formed up panting in a crescent on our familiar beach, all the men and women and children of Quail Island, all that was left of us, in our rough but civilized clothes, decent and shaven and seemly. Our knees trembled, those of the young ones from sheer excitement, those of the elders because we remembered that this bay had brought us grim pages of our history.

And now——?

We waited.

Uncle Erasmus stepped down to the water's edge, strong and sure as ever, less out of breath than anybody, serene and quiet as one of our pine trees. And I, from such long habit, took up my place beside and a little behind him, his Ancient, his powder-monkey.

A small, strange boat, almost like those pictured in our volumes of *Wonders of the World* as used on the Euphrates since prehistoric times, was thrown overboard, and two of the boy scouts from Mars stepped gingerly into it and were paddled across the narrow strip of water.

We stood there, statues.

"Anybody speak the English?" asked the one we noticed, the one we knew at once was the captain of this ship that flew, as he stepped into the shallows, and asking, grinned at his lovely, silly question.

He was a hard, square block of a young man, with a brown, hard, square face and eyes as keen and hard as a gull's. But in his right cheek a nerve jumped at moments, as if life had not always been as easy as it seemed when you looked at him. On sight we accepted him, and a pleased subdued murmur, that had no words, stirred among us.

For all his boy-scout clothes and his grin, he had an air of authority. He was different from us, different even from

my son, Erasmus. A boy a thousand years old. In a seeing second while he approached I grasped what had gone wrong on Quail Island. We had stood still and remained back in 1914. The world, for better or worse, had marched on. This squat young figure looked almost a dwarf compared with some of our fine lads, but he had something they lacked. He was eager and alive and powerful and questing. And gentle, too. He did not laugh at us. It was the first time I had ever thought that anybody might have done so.

Uncle Erasmus remained himself, however, to gladden our hearts, a man even amongst skyman from Mars.

"I am Erasmus Quail, young man," he said in his level, deep voice. "Welcome to Quail Island."

He held out his hand, and the skyman, reaching up, wrung it.

"More than pleased to meet you, sir," he said, and meant it. "This is a knock-out. It's 'Dr. Livingstone, I presume'—only much more so."

It was good he said that. We felt easier; he seemed less extraordinary, more human; we smiled with him.

"I'm Lofty Taylor," he went on, nerve flicking in his cheek, "skipper of the Sunderland out there. Your island, Mr. Quail, is a kinda miracle."

"We return the compliment," said Uncle Erasmus, "for you and your flying machine are an actual miracle to us. We had been expecting a miracle, but we didn't know what form it would take. I think, Lofty, it has taken a very pleasant form."

From my uncle's tone and the way he looked down with his stare of a kindly hawk I knew it was going to be all right, and the natural fears that had stirred in me were lulled.

Lofty Taylor did not understand, but let it pass.

"Well, we certainly didn't expect your island, sir," he said, "and it's a miracle to find it here. We should be in 'Frisco right now; we might have been well and truly ditched. The gale—and Gremlins, swarms of Gremlins—in the compass, in the chronometers—everywhere, Gremlins!"

"Gremlins?" my uncle echoed, eyebrows lifting quizzically at this new word which somehow almost explained itself.

"Tell you about them later, sir," said Lofty. "Queer little cusses. You'd be surprised. But anyway we made Quail

land on our last gallon of fuel. Couldn't believe our eyes. 's not on our chart."

"I'm not surprised, Lofty."

"But we've changed all that. Got a perfect fix, and sent back. They'll have a relief out to us with fuel in a couple of days."

"So?" said Uncle Erasmus, and considered the fact that the stocky young man had lifted Quail Island out of the timeless void into the world. But he smiled and nodded, so again he felt it would be all right.

"Kinda like discovering the place," Lofty said, his gull's eyes looking sharply about. "Christopher Columbus stuff. And yet," he added with regret, "not really. It's civilized—you people here. Yes, you people! Say, sir, how long have you been here?"

"Some little time, Lofty. Since early nineteen-fourteen."

For all his marvels that made Lofty Taylor gulp, as if he'd been hit in the wind.

"Nineteen-fourteen? No kidding?"

"No kidding."

"Good God," breathed Lofty Taylor.

"Yes, good God," Uncle Erasmus agreed gently, talking to the skyman as if they were old friends. "You've brought the rum, of course, Lofty?"

The skyman blinked. He knew a million things hidden from us, but he didn't know my Uncle Erasmus yet.

"Why, yes, sir," he said. "I believe there is a bottle."

"There is," said Uncle Erasmus, quite sure. "You've brought it for me."

Poor Lofty!—who didn't know Uncle Erasmus. He did his best, and quickly and well.

"That's so," he said. "I must have. But why?"

"A kind of a private bet, Lofty."

"Boy, oh boy," chuckled the captain of the miracle ship. "Better and better! I couldn't ever have made this up." He swung about, and flung up his hand in a commanding jerk. His boy scouts were lounging about, gazing, shading their eyes, trying to follow what was afoot. "Shorty!" he called. "Hy, Shorty!"

A lean young man, taller than my uncle, straightened up.

"Yeh, Lofty?"

"We got something here, baby," yelled Lofly. "And have we got something! Sending the dinghy back. Dig out that liquid sunshine, and send it pronto. Got a customer here who has a bottle of rum on order. Seems that's why we ever made it."

"Okay, chief," said Shorty, with that same gesture, casually, as if nothing really surprising could ever happen.

If in our hearts, remembering the past, we still wanted reassurance we had it then.

Turning about, the skyman found that Uncle Erasmus had forgotten him and was kneeling on the sand, his head bowed in prayer. Lofly Taylor said nothing, showed nothing. He waited, quiet, unsmiling, respectful.

CHAPTER XI

I

GREAT and quickening days on Quail Island. The boat that flew was not only a marvel in herself—she brought the richest cargo of marvels ever carried. All else the storm had done ceased to matter compared with this wanderer it had blown into our lives. Cabins went unrepaired, damaged crops and such things were forgotten, and, though we buried Mrs. Wise in seemly fashion, the brave new world was much in our minds even there in God's Acre. Our placid daily routine was splintered into bits, and we scamped even essential tasks, eager not to waste a minute out of the skyman's company, thirsting to hear more and more and more.

So Davy Hawthorne had been right down at the salt pans when he said the Germans from the sea might be lying? At the very time when they were bragging and bullying and swaggering, their invincible armies were on the brink of defeat and their vaunted navy beaten off the seas to be scuttled ignominiously in the end, and their Kaiser, in whose name Captain von Schomberg had tried to take possession of Quail Island, was on the eve of abdication and exile.

If we had only known——!

The truth made me proud that my young brother Jonathan had shot von Schomberg. Had it been anybody but Jonathan I should have envied him. It seemed a more tragic thing than ever that poor Jim Pearce, so sinned against, should have had to die for being the instrument of just vengeance.

We were horrified, appalled that the Germans should have been able to start another World War such a little while later—or so it seemed on Quail Island where time flowed differently. But for all that, and their early triumphs on this occasion, we knew that those Germans were smashed and defeated again.

The skymen proved very young, younger in some ways than Willie Wise, but still always, oh! so old. Much older than Uncle Erasmus. It sounds a contradiction, but it wasn't so. They had whole libraries of terrible knowledge, whole lifetimes of dark and wonderful experience, hidden and unknown to us, though they were little more than lads.

The war the Germans from the sea had brought to us didn't matter to them, and only their desire to be polite and helpful enabled them to understand our interest.

"That old war," Lofty said, sweeping it into the dead past with a slicing gesture of his powerful arm, "not taught any more. Happened before most of us were born. The war to end wars!" He laughed, mouth twisting. "People who talk about that war have been crashing bores for centuries. Settle on you in pubs, and gas about Mons and Chateau-Thierry and the Somme, and Sopwith Camels and Gnus. Important in their day, of course, and they had guts. Plenty guts. But a bore. So much has happened, see? I suppose it's hard for you to realize." A worried look crossed his face, for he was kind. "Not that I mean you're bores asking about it. After the stuff those Jerries fed you it's natural you should want to sort things out. Only I mean—oh, well, you get it!"

We did, in a way.

But it wasn't easy. They talked, as if it was hardly worth mentioning, as if such things were commonplaces, of cities bigger than Sydney reduced to a rubble of ruins, of air fleets counted in tens of thousands, of sky-trains one hundred and fifty miles long dropping whole armies complete with big guns and tanks, of rocket-shells fired by the Germans from the Hague—where the Palace of Peace used to be in our time—to fall accurately on London, of—

No need to prolong the list. To the rest of the world these things were yesterday's history. Not to us. Again and again we had to beg them to stop, explain and elucidate. They were patient; they did not treat us as yokels. Even apart from technicalities, and the names of things we had never heard of, they spoke a different language, so that often they had to translate for us, creasing their brows as they searched for words of one syllable we simpletons could understand.

Their outlook baffled us, too. They spoke of dropping ten-ton bombs on Germans, and yet they did not seem to hate the Germans as much as we did. They talked of them as Jerries, with a kind of dispassionate contempt, as if, for all the evil they had done, they were still rather stupid fellows playing in a brass band on the street corner.

Uncle Erasmus had placed Lofty in the special care of Naomi and me, which was an honour and a privilege. On that first afternoon he took us out to his ship that flew, and stunned us with its wonders. It was more than a ship—it was a fort and a factory and a laboratory all encased in a long silver cigar. Naomi exclaimed in delight over the kitchen, and I stood awed before the guns and the bomb racks and the Marconi set with which they could speak to the world so remote from us whilst flying at two hundred and fifty miles an hour through space.

But, he said with a shrug, the old Sunderland was nothing much to write home about—not these days. They were building flying boats to carry two hundred people with a range of five thousand miles. And even that was only a beginning.

Once we might have exclaimed in incredulity. Not now. We believed anything Lofty told us, accepted everything. Nothing was too fantastic, it seemed.

We sat on the beach in the cool shadow of the pines, with Lofty in the midst of an absorbed circle, all insisting that he should go on talking. Other groups were scattered about around the rest of the skymen, for we were reluctant to go out of sight of the flying boat as if we feared it might vanish.

"It sounds like *The War of the Worlds*, Lofty," I said.

He looked puzzled.

"By Mr. H. G. Wells."

"Oh," he said, "tell you the truth I don't get much time for reading. Only the light stuff."

"It must be strange to see your fictions come true. Is Mr. Wells still alive?"

"I wouldn't know for sure. Hey, Shorty!—that writer-bloke, Wells, is he still around?"

Shorty, with his own audience, tugged his sharp chin.

"I think so, Lofty," he called. "Or am I thinking of Bernard Shaw? No, I fancy Wells is still alive and kicking. Or was last I heard—if I ever heard."

"And Mr. Kipling?" I said. "He wrote about aeroplanes when I was a kid and people thought of them as toys."

"Kipling? No, I guess he's dead. I'm sure he is. Quite a while back. I used to read him myself at school. He'd have made a honey of a job of modern flying stuff, come to think of it. My old man was a sea-captain. Fan of Kipling's. Said he didn't misname technicalities, I remember. Yeh, he was O.K., Kipling, Mr. Quail."

Mr. Quail! When I was the schoolboy listening open-mouthed.

"It'd make it easier if you called me Jeremy, Lofty," I said, asking a favour.

Lofty gave his wide grin.

"Jeremy it is, Jeremy," he said, "and Naomi. That's a swell name."

He was so easy and friendly we had to love him.

"More, more," pleaded Naomi, looking like Namy; hands clasped about her brown knees, eyes glowing. "Tell us more, Lofty."

A million things.

Every time he spoke: news—news of thirty years surely more full of news than any in all time. Or was that only because with each casual word he took the curtains of blue that shut us in, tore them apart, and opened another amazing vista? Surely not? What other three decades since there was a calendar would have enabled messengers to bring such tidings of man's tragedies and man's follies and man's heroism and man's progress and man's madness? At moments our reaction made Lofty think again, and even he saw that what he'd been saying as mere gossip was really most extraordinary, indeed.

And it had all happened whilst I grew up from a youngster in needless spectacles to a middle-aged farmer, a grandfather but a young one.

"So darned much to tell," Lofty grumbled, and suddenly slapping his thigh went on: "Why, I haven't even got round to what's probably the biggest news of all for you folk—the other war right here in your Pacific."

We, of course, looked blank and wagged our heads.

"Keep forgetting," he apologized. "It's—it's as if we'd landed on Mars."

I had to laugh at that.

"But, Lofty," I said, "you're the men from Mars, don't you see? I've been thinking of you as that all along."

The skin at the corners of his gull's eyes crinkled.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "But don't get me side-tracked. There's so much to tell. This Pacific war. The way things are turning out, it's not likely to upset you now, but a few years back, holy catfish! you might have got a greater surprise than those Jerries gave you. Listen!"

Be sure we listened.

The last we had heard of the Japanese was when the Germans said the British were so desperate that they had even cringed to the yellow monkeymen to get them to fight on their side.

We were out-of-date again—more so than would have seemed possible.

Australia—white Australia where coloured people were barred—had only been saved, said Lofty, by the width of a cat's whisker and the American fleet.

I remembered the Great White Fleet which had come to Sydney when I was a child, queer ships unlike ours with masts of trellis-work.

A Jap submarine had fired torpedoes where those ships had lain, inside Sydney Heads through which we had sailed that summer afternoon.

One of the great sea battles of history had been fought a few hundred miles off the coast of Queensland.

Singapore and Burma and Java and the Philippines had fallen, and were being won back.

Now our bombers were raiding Tokyo and our fleets lay off Japan.

Lofty went on and on until his throat was hoarse.

Thirty years' newspapers delivered in one day! And what years!

Is it any wonder that we were pulverized into stupidity, and only the stolidest pumpkin slept on Quail Island that night?

II

The skymen, though their stock-in-trade was marvels, found us full of interest, too, and whenever we could spare a moment from listening they would question us with flattering eagerness about our little lives and our little history.

"Match that!" they would exclaim, chuckling with delight over something which seemed just routine to us.

Sometimes they'd hum a few bars of the old songs we knew—like "A Bicycle Built for Two"—and exchange glances which they didn't mean to be noticed. Yes, though they were too polite to show it, we must have seemed a rum lot to them.

To give only one example. They were quite tickled by our bathing arrangements, which remained the same as they had been on that first Sunday: the ladies using one bay and the men the other, even the married people dividing. True, as Aunt Grace had prophesied when she was bold and brazen, the ladies no longer bothered about costumes, but that, in the circumstances, didn't matter of course. Yes, they were tickled at first by what seemed like primness, but when they thought it over they saw that Uncle Erasmus had been right, as usual.

"For," said Shorty with a grin, "you wouldn't be civilized long if you started running round a desert island mid nodings on. Wow!—that would lead to trouble. Plenty!"

And so it was with other things. They weren't church-going folk themselves, but they saw the wisdom of our Sundays in our world. They saw the wisdom of us having clung to ordinary clothes. They were good at seeing things, our men from Mars.

"You don't know it, Jeremy, but you're the luckiest people alive," said Lofty, on the second evening when we sat on the verandah of the cabin which had been empty since the

Coopers died. We had taken it over temporarily because we couldn't be bothered about a detail like re-roofing our own home just then. Lofty was our guest there. "I can't begin to tell you what this experience means to us. We're ordinary blokes, glorified mechanics, and this island of yours is something we could never even have dreamed of. And you yourselves. You know I don't mean to be rude when I say this, but it's like stepping back into an old family album that's come alive. A simple, better world than ours, for all our gadgets. A cleaner world. A lucky world. Think of all the troubles and miseries and bad times you've missed."

"There's a lot of truth in that," I said, "but it's a dying world in a queer kind of way."

"Your Uncle Erasmus is getting all that doped out," Lofty said shrewdly. "He's a live guy, that one. Look at the job he's done here—making this swell world. I wish to God I'd been old enough to come with you." He sat a moment, his face hungry, and then he shook his head and his grin came back. "No, that's a lie, Jeremy. It's a lie, old son. With all its faults I'll take that out there—wars, sudden death and quick promotion given in. Yes, it's a lousy world out there, Jeremy, and it's going to be worse before it's better, but it has its moments, Jeremy. It certainly has its moments."

"Jim Pearce thought like you," I remembered, and I told him about Jim.

It was one of the kind of incidents they loved to hear, studying them, turning them over as if they were curios they'd picked up, oddities from an unknown land.

He was sorry about Jim Pearce—just as sorry as if he himself had never dropped a bomb or killed anyone.

It seemed their machines did the killing for them, and left them quite unaffected.

That was another of the million things.

"Your Uncle Erasmus handled the whole show very neatly," Lofty said. "Tell me more about him. He's a star turn, if ever there was one. You should have seen the boys' faces when, just by way of keeping us amused, he opened a couple of chests and showed us they were full of sovereigns. Our eyes stuck out like snails'. We only have paper money these days. Those sovereigns of his are worth quids and quids each. He must be a millionaire."

"He is," I said proudly, "and he wouldn't ever be bothered paying with paper money. He carried gold round in a leather office bag, and bought the schooner and everything else with gold. But he was a wise man. He knew just what to do with his money when he made the Daybreak strike."

"I'll say he did," said Lofty, "though nobody but him would ever have thought of it."

"Nobody!" I agreed, and I talked on about my Uncle Erasmus, bragging a bit, I'm afraid, rather like a small boy who has been awed by another small boy's toys and is delighted to find that he has the finest thing of all in his own play-cupboard. "My uncle," I heard myself boasting, "is the greatest man in the world."

"I wouldn't say No to that," Lofty nodded, "and such a kid, too. Younger than we are, with his fun and games, his banjo and his songs and his rum and all. Never a dull moment! Yes, Jeremy, I agree with you—your Uncle Erasmus is a grand old boy, and I don't wonder you cock a chest about him."

Lofty was a fine chap, too—one after my own heart.

III

A memorable occasion. This was the first formal dinner-party ever given on Quail Island, the first Naomi and I had attended, and, for all his wealth, perhaps the first Uncle Erasmus had attended, too. Everything had been left to Aunt Grace and her willing slave, Miss McGregor, and they had done things in style and with cunning.

The menu they had chosen was all cold, so that Miss McGregor and Willie Wise could serve it with the minimum of fuss, leaving us free to talk, and never had a group of people less difficulty about finding subjects for conversation. It was a simple meal, but everything was good. We began with our fine oysters, and then had a small bowl of crayfish, served cold with a special tart sauce which only the Misses McGregor knew how to make from certain wild berries and herbs which were the secrets of mother and daughter. Nobody had ever cooked or prepared food with more loving skill than the Misses McGregor. After that there was cold roast beef and a green

salad, the meat under-done and so tender that it melted away in the mouth, and to finish there was a fruit salad.

The skymen smacked their lips like hungry schoolboys, and made no secret of their enjoyment. They said it was super and wizard, because everything was fresh and not one thing out of a can. That so much of the food in the rich world should come from tins was a shock to us.

It was late in the season, but we had had a good summer, apart from the gale, and the night was hot and still. My uncle's room of mellowed wood with its open sides seemed spacious and dignified. The spears of the candles were golden and steady, glittering on the embroidered wings on the skymen's jackets and picking out their bright ribbons, for they had put on their best uniforms for the party, and looked very fine and handsome. Uncle Erasmus had had long talks with them, finding out the particular things he wished to know, and now he had decreed that this was ladies' night, and he and I did not matter at all and were to be merely eating mouths and listening ears.

That was like my uncle. Most men of his command and presence would have wished to dominate the table, or would have done so without giving the point a second thought. The years of his reign had not made him any the less wise and gentle. So he and I sat opposite each other at the centre of the table, whilst Aunt Grace and Naomi were enthroned at the ends where the lights were brightest, and they commanded all attention.

They commanded more than attention. There was homage and admiration, and something almost like love, certainly warm affection, in the eyes and voices of these skymen in their dashing uniforms—the like of which we had never seen before—who remained young of heart for all their wisdom and experience and wonders.

That was as it should have been. All through the years I had been proud of my Aunt Grace and my Naomi, each of whom had always seemed perfect in her own way, but never prouder than that night. After all, they were the womenfolk of a Swiss Family Robinson, they were lady Crusoes. They might have looked quaint and ungroomed, even absurd; they might have been overwhelmed and tongue-tied among these laughing, teasing strangers after all the long years of only Us.

Instead they were perfect hostesses, playing the part without self-consciousness, gay and sparkling and full of enjoyment, so that the skymen became part of the family and said what they liked and were at ease and happy.

Many of their compliments puzzled us, but there was no mistaking that they were compliments.

"I'll never think of sarongs again in connection with desert islands," said Lofty.

"You've said it," agreed Shorty, "Dorothy Lamour's out as my pin-up girl."

"I used to hanker for Greer Garson," said Thornton, the wireless operator. "I had to come all this way to Quail Island to find out my mistake."

They laughed, and we laughed with them, though we didn't understand a word.

There was Aunt Grace in her party frock which was a quarter of a century old, but still as good as the day Miss Titgens' fond fingers made it, and she was a picture of the kind candle-light was made for.

And there was my Naomi in her woollen gown, which sounds quite dreadful but was as soft and lovely as anything ever woven by silkworms, for it had been spun from the best of our own wool by Mrs. Wise, and when she sat at her wheel the quiet little woman the gale had killed was a genius. Nobody else on the island could do such things with wool, and, oddly, though willing enough to teach her craft she could not do so because she didn't know just what happened herself. Yet she could take wool and turn it into a fibre fit for a princess.

Naomi's frock was the colour of palest honey. It was made without sleeves and cut low at the neck—a party gown; it moulded to her body, nestled lovingly to it—that body which no grandmother had a right to have. Her smooth brown arms and neck and shoulders were almost the same colour, and as soft. On her right breast—surely not a grandmother?—she wore a spray of the delicate mauve flowers which we called Purples, and a single blossom nestled in her smooth, short hair. Simple things had always suited Naomi best. Looking at her at the end of the table, glowing and so alive and quick yet cool, I remembered a certain sugar sack and suddenly I felt awfully silly and I was well pleased nobody was paying any attention to a sentimental backwoodsman in his forties.

"And who are these poor ladies you slight because you are safe behind thousands of miles of sea?" asked Aunt Grace.

It seemed they were film stars, and that, like almost everything else that was said, started us off on a new tangent. Even the celluloid world had changed beyond recognition. No more A. B., Vitagraph or Keystone films. The words meant nothing to them. Now all pictures talked and were in natural colour and soon would be stereoscopic. Then, they asked, what about television?

We could only echo the question.

They tried to explain, they tried to make the miracle seem possible, but if we hadn't grown hardened to miracles we must have thought they were pulling our legs when they declared that living pictures of actual events could be sent through thin air, without wires or mirrors or anything, and reproduced on a glass screen in your own front-room.

It was only, they explained, a natural extension of radio, of broadcasting.

Of what?

And we were off again on another hare-and-hounds race as question and half-comprehended answers which left of breathless.

In truth, a dinner-party where conversation could not flag.

"Oh," said Aunt Grace, "it's all very astounding, but we're getting too technical. I never could understand even how a motor-car worked."

"The manager of the Commercial Bank used to come courting Aunt Grace in his motor-car," I said. "In his 'Merry Oldsmobile'—there was a song about the Oldsmobile—and cars were something to stare at then."

I wanted them to see my Aunt Grace when she blushed, and behind her curly lips her teeth showed so white, as if she'd been biting an apple. They saw, and they didn't try to hide their delight.

"Aunt Grace!" said Shorty. "And you turned the poor guy down?"

"Jeremy," said Aunt Grace, "that's most unchivalrous, and before my fiancé! You are supposed to take a back seat at this party. Please do so. Talking of me being courted by a man when motor-cars were novelties. Oh, fie, Jeremy. You make me a thousand years old."

That was such a joke that we raised a shout of denying laughter, for indeed Aunt Grace by candlelight looked younger than when Mr. Bicycle used to call.

"But the fashions?" asked Aunt Grace. "What do the ladies wear in these smart modern days?"

The question gave them pause. They were glib enough with their news of magic, but this simple point caused them to look at each other in doubt and inquiry.

"Well," said Lofty, "clothes, you know."

"I should hope so," said Naomi.

It was Lofty's turn to blush.

"I mean to say, well, I suppose so many of them being in uniform. I mean——"

And we were off after another hare to learn that in the new world women fought with the army, the navy and the air force, that women piloted giant bombers, that women had flown to Australia from England, that women drove racing motor-cars and speedboats that travelled in the water almost as fast as the cars on land.

Aunt Grace and my Naomi listened in amazement.

"It sounds wonderful," said Naomi. "It makes me want to be a little girl again."

"But you are a little girl, Naomi," said Lofty.

"Not in that way," said Naomi, and she sighed. There had always been a lot of the boy in her, although she was so much a girl.

"The suffragettes must be delighted," said Aunt Grace.

The men of the new world fumbled with that word for an instant.

"Oh, them," said Shorty. "Used to hit policemen and tie 'emself to railings?"

"That's right," said Lofty. "One threw herself under the king's horse in the Derby and got killed. I heard about that. They wanted the vote, didn't they?"

"Very badly," said Aunt Grace. "It was going to make everything different—it was going to end wars and poverty—it was the great cure-all."

Massingham, the navigator, who was a silent kind of chap, grinned widely and said: "Bet you were never much of a suffragette, Aunt Grace?"

Aunt Grace shook her pretty head.

"Did they get their silly old vote, then?"

Again the young men looked at each other.

"Why, yes, of course," said Lofty. "Ages ago. Everybody votes now, except in places like Germany and Japan. Oh, yes, women vote everywhere, I guess. Why, they're fined in Australia if they don't."

"So they're fined if they don't vote," said Aunt Grace, and her smile was comically knowing. "But talking of that Derby—how is the dear King?"

"He's swell," said Thornton. "Lofty and Shorty can give you all the dope on him. They went to Buckingham Palace to get their gongs."

That had to be translated.

"I suppose I shouldn't admit it," said Aunt Grace, "but I was taken to England for his coronation."

They looked bewildered.

"I don't get it," said Lofty. "You mean from here? From Quail Island?"

"No, no, silly," said Aunt Grace. "How could I have gone from here? From Australia. With the family when I was almost a child."

Another hare, another chase. We were talking about very different kings—our King was George the Fifth—and then there was the Prince of Wales and all that amazing story, and now the new King who had given Lofty and Shorty their gongs.

That was the way it was.

The last course had been eaten, and the coffee they'd insisted on providing was handed round. It tasted queer after the stuff we ground from our berries which grew almost wild—a different drink altogether, rich and Oriental, which tickled our throats. We didn't sweeten it with the honey we used in place of sugar. Then they handed round their cigarettes, but my uncle preferred his pipe, and Naomi refused because she had never learnt to smoke, but Aunt Grace took one though she knew it would make her cough.

"I used to smoke dainty gold-tipped scented ones," she recalled.

"You must have been pretty mighty dainty and scented and gold-tipped yourself, Aunt Grace," said Lofty, who knew he could say anything he liked to her, being a favourite.

"You're very bold, Lofty," said Aunt Grace, who liked him to be bold.

We tried not to praise their neat and lovely lighters which worked so wonderfully, because if we had admired them they would have had to give them to us, and we were not beggars. We had our own small brazier lighters with the fungus in them which gave off sweet scent as it smouldered so that whilst we tried not to admire theirs the skymen found ours swell and dandy.

Suddenly, to my surprise, Willie Wise appeared with a tray of small glasses which I had never seen before, though Uncle Erasmus must have brought them from Sydney in the long ago. Willie noticed my questioning glance, and looked superior as if I were the young Jeremy of the schooner and in truth I felt like that, since time is not the arbitrary thing men make it.

My uncle, who had not spoken a word all the evening, eased himself out of his chair and, since he wished it so, I sitting opposite him was the only one who saw him go. He had not lost his knack of moving lightly, for all his size and the growing weight of years. He was away briefly in the shadows, the second lot of candles burning low.

"Boy, Ancient," he said to me as he re-appeared, "what have I here?"

Everybody, for just that moment, stopped talking.

"A bottle, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, and stopped because I did not intend to hazard guesses with him.

"Right, boy, quite right. And you do well not to assume knowledge beyond you. This bottle, boy, contains Cockburn's 1908 port, which I was told, by a reputable merchant, would be drinkable in due course. Port is nothing to me, boy, but it is something to produce this night for our guests. Yes, it is something." He moved round the table. "Boy," he said to me, "fill my dwarf glass with rum which stands on the side there. So little left, but still a miraculous draught."

Anybody but Uncle Erasmus would have let Willie Wise serve him rum. I jumped to my feet.

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said eagerly, and as I did so I saw Aunt Grace and Naomi smile at me and each other and at Uncle Erasmus, and that shared flash of smile was, perhaps, a greater wonder than television and all kinds of things.

My uncle moved round the table, a vast shadow, and he filled the glasses himself whilst I filled his. "Ancient," he said, as we resumed our places, "this bottle is the last of the last of the Mohicans on Quail Island. Did I do well to serve it for this dinner-party?"

I had not expected the question; I had no answer.

"Why, yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I found myself saying, under his hawk stare, "for to-night we celebrate a new birth for Quail Island."

Uncle Erasmus was mightily pleased.

"The makings, Ancient," he said "and you are still trusting your heart and instincts as I have always done. That answer did not come from your reading, or from the fact that you are a grandfather. All fares well with us, Ancient. Now we must retire into our shadows again, boy, and leave the field to the ladies. First I have a toast: To our guests' world and to our world—may both prosper."

He lifted his glass and we all stood and raised the pretty little glasses and drank. The red wine sparkled in the light of the candles, and we were all smiling and bowing and nodding at each other up there where the gold melted into the dark, so that nobody there would ever, ever forget any face in the charmed circle.

We sat down then, rather awed and hushed.

The port tasted to me like the raspberry vinegar we used to drink in Australia, but sweeter and richer.

Lofty was on his feet again, a little stubby figure like the stump of a felled tree.

"Uncle Erasmus, sir," said he, "you have given this evening to the ladies and to us, and you have made us part of your family, so may I offer a toast?"

"Young chap," said Uncle Erasmus, "you may."

"You keep telling us how staggered you are by this and that," said Lofty, gull's eyes creasing, "but I want to propose a toast to a great wonder you have here on Quail Island." He paused, and his brown grin was a joy to see. "You're the goods, Uncle Erasmus, sir," he said. "Anybody else would have been smirking and getting the modest bibful ready." He turned suddenly on me, and, seeing what a little time he had been with us, I was amazed at the way he did it, but I suppose it showed how much quicker their minds worked out

in that fantastic world. "You, boy," he mocked. "Did you think I was going to propose your uncle's health?"

It was a good joke but somehow to my ears a bit blasphemous. I suppose that was why I was so taken aback.

"Why, yes, sir, Lofty," was all I could say.

"Dolt!" said Lofty, who could never have heard my uncle actually use that word. "With such a kick-off the only possible toast I could be proposing is that of our lovely hostesses—hostesses lovelier than any at any stage-door canteen—Aunt Grace, Naomi!"

At that we were on our feet again, and Uncle Erasmus drew his great paw across his great nose, and I did something similar in my smaller fashion, and my Aunt Grace and my Naomi sat there shining in the dying candlelight.

The evening, perhaps, reached its climax then and should have ended, but we were too eager, too simple, and there were worlds to say. Willie Wise took the guttering candles away and let in the moonlight. It stole in silver and kind and gentle and warm, our Quail Island moon.

And Aunt Grace, knowing what we all wanted, stopped the evening ending.

"We keep branching off," she sighed. "I did hope to hear about the fashions."

So that was all right, and we settled down again, the beautiful, exotic cigarettes our guests handed round rubies in a setting of silver.

"It's kind of hard," said Lofty.

"But hats? What are hats like?"

"Well, lots of girls wear hankies round their heads—snoods, I think they're called."

"Snoods?" said Aunt Grace. "Yes, I can imagine them. Naomi would wear one. But not me. What should I wear?"

"Well, the hats are silly. Just a bit of a thing with a crazy flower or feather. They look as if they'd been made up on the spur of the moment when the designer had had a couple and was feeling frisky and wanted to play a joke."

"Oh, lovely!" said Aunt Grace. "I want one of those hats."

My uncle was smiling in his beard, but he did not intrude or say a word.

"And frocks? Long or short?"

"What do you think, Shorty?" asked Lofty helplessly.

"Kind of medium," said Shorty. "When I was a kid I can remember they were like kilts—'way up above the knees."

Now it was Naomi's turn.

"Oh, lovely!" she cried, delighted.

"Not so lovely," said Shorty. "All the dames haven't got legs like you—like you have on Quail Island. There were some pretty awful sights. I was only a kid, but it put me off girls' legs for years, though I've got a bit of interest back now."

"We can't see you in the moonlight," said Aunt Grace.

"What are they wearing underneath? Petticoats and so on, though, of course, you wouldn't know."

The skymen weren't a bit embarrassed.

"Why, they only wear panties and brassières," said Lofty.

"You could make them out of a couple of silk handkerchiefs."

"It must be a fine world," said Naomi.

"Full of wonders, and no mysteries," said Aunt Grace. She was sad, but shook the moment off to ask: "Who are the actors and actresses now? Who are the matinée idols?"

So we went on talking, talking, like a re-united family instead of strangers from strange worlds, and the Quail Island moon, which had seen all our lives but never anything like this before, smiled broadly in at us.

IV

The call the Sunderland had sent into space had been answered from behind the wall of blue, and now two white swans rode in our bay, as if the first-comer had been joined by its mate. We were proud and awed when we looked at our crowded anchorage, and there were more skymen, more strange faces on Quail Island, so that it seemed, having found us at last, the world flooded in to take possession.

Even after that brief lapse of days there was news, great news, the greatest news, so we saw again how swiftly things happened out there.

The new boy scouts from Mars came ashore full of savage yet good-natured abuse for Lofty and his crew, only a tenth

of which made sense to us. They advised them to go back to the training squadron; they said they were only fit to fly kids' kites; they said it was a pity the Gremlins hadn't made a clean job of it.

For the war in Europe was over, and they had been ordered out in the midst of the rejoicings.

"Poor show," Lofty admitted glumly, guiltily. "Damn poor show. No wonder you're browned off."

"But we shall do our poor best to make you happy here on Quail Island," said Uncle Erasmus. "So another of the bloody chapters I foresaw has been closed. Perhaps in a little while the world will enjoy a spell of sanity."

"It won't ever happen again," said Shor'ty.

"They said that last time," said Lofty.

We all stood silent, considering the fact.

"They've got the right idea here on Quail Island, Bill," Lofty went on to the other captain. "They just live in the Garden of Eden and hear about these ruddy wars at second-hand. They're as interested as anything, dear ducks, but they simply don't know or have to know. We may all be missing a bit of fun at the moment, I admit, but you won't be sorry you had to come here. You can get tight almost any night. Quail Island's something that's never happened in your young life before. You don't know nothin' yet."

We had recovered balance, and it was fun to watch how these new mighty sky-men gazed at us and our island, eyes round with wondering, puzzled surprise, much as I remembered gazing at my first pantomime.

That did us good, making us feel that, though we were simpletons, we were somebodies.

v

We would be busy making candles hereafter for the hall was lit more brilliantly than ever before. That was only proper. This was our great Victory Ball, which marked the close of an era for the world out there, and the close of an era on Quail Island. The flags that my uncle had bought so many years ago were of the best quality. Hadn't he gone to

the merchant with his leather bag of sovereigns? They had retained their colours, and looked gay as ever that night, but then everything and everyone was gay and had cause to be.

I stood with Tim Murphy by the gramophone.

"Faith, we may creak a bit the ould machine and I," said Tim, as he put on another of our carefully preserved records, "but we were made of good tough stuff, and there's life in us yet."

"You bet, Tim."

"I'm thinking out there in the cities now with all their rushing about at thousands and thousands of miles an hour, and their telephones without wires, and their doodahs of every imaginable kind, they can't have much time for making things to last. I'm thinking they must live in a rare old hurly-burly, and it's only here on Quail Island that people can be sure enough of a future to look ahead and plan for it."

"So you don't want to go back to all the things you used to miss at first, Tim—to the pubs and the races and the football and your cronies down the street?"

Tim Murphy ruffled his wild silver hair and looked shocked.

"Ye blasphemous young limb," he said. "D'you think I'm mad entirely? B' Mary and all the Saints, the only way I'll ever lave Quail Island at all is in me coffin, which God forbid. Wasn't I the prime mover in the wonderful journey that brought us here?"

"I never knew that, Tim," I said, taking care not to smile.

"It's the bare truth," he said. "Didn't your blessed uncle come to me and lay his proposition before me? 'Mr. Murphy,' he says, 'if ye're after thinking well of me plan, I'll go ahead.' 'Mr. Quail,' says I, 'I'm on, and if it's a good bet for me and my gorgeous family, if it's good enough for the Murphys,' I says, 'then it's good enough for the highest in the land.' Your uncle, Jeremy, I can see him now as he did it, he took me hand and he pumped me arm up and down and the tears of gratitude were streaming down his face. 'Tim, you darlint man,' says he, 'ye've banished all me qualms. I'm in yer debt to the day I die.' I thought he was going to be giving me a sack of gold on the spot, but when I mentioned the matter he said he'd see to that when we were all safe aboard. And looking back at what I was then I can only add: 'Ah, the godlike wisdom of the dear man.'"

I didn't believe a word of this, except the bit about the gold, but it was good to find that the bent and gnarled old smith remained very much Tim Murphy.

Whilst we talked I watched the dancers. Our girls were doing well with their happily surprised partners. Even the newest comers were finding Quail Island a very fine place for a Victory Ball. There was much teaching of new steps and old to and fro, and eyes were very bright and everyone laughing. Eve Paterson held court, a dark Queen of Sheba; my sister Ruth had not been aged by her quiet years as Mrs. Smith, and she was like a lovely flaxen-haired doll, a princess still. There were others, too, all in their best and looking their best by reason of the novelty and excitement and the strange, free, friendly, easy ways of the youngsters from the world.

But none in more demand than my Aunt Grace and my Naomi.

Naomi was dancing with Lofly. The steps they were doing reminded me all at once of Solly Solomon, and I remembered how I thought Solly had held Naomi too tightly. It seemed to me now that Solly was a better dancer than I guessed then, and perhaps ahead of the rest of us. Poor Solly!

"'Tis a great marvel," said Tim Murphy, "how history repates itself. D'y' recall, Jeremy, boy, the Deliverance Day ball, the night we buried the Prussian? Well, now, just as then, this very eve your uncle called me into his little room and poured me a tot of his precious rum, poured it without so much as me dropping a hint. A grand and a good man, and the taste of the stuff ate the years away like a rabbit at lettuce."

As he spoke he had drawn closer, and on his breath I smelt the familiar reek. A queer thing to have the effect it did, for suddenly the bright, gay hall turned misty before my eyes, and the dancers faded and blurred and the place was full of ghosts who danced—my little brother Jonathan and his Rosie with her hair of flame, my dove-quiet mother and Dad Barnaby, Dominie Paterson, old Lord Nelson and his chubby Maggie, Davy Hawthorne—all of them, all of them. They slept under the snowy carpet of the white flowers in God's Acre, but they were there, too, dancing, joining in the fun, having a lovely time as we'd always had. And the happiest thing of all was that, dancing, laughing, with them and us and with the skyemen was the dominie's Grace, and that young

Jeremy Quail and the slim girl Naomi and Tim Murphy in his strength and the rest just as we used to be. So that our log-built hall was crowded and richer than it had ever been.

Suddenly to-night's Naomi stood before me looking up with her big grey eyes. She made a quick signal to Tim Murphy, and no doubt it was all arranged, for he put on the record of the "Blue Danube" waltz.

"Sweet ghosts," said Naomi, as I hugged my eager arm about her. She always knew everything. It would have been black for me had I ever wished to keep a secret. "Come, Jeremy," she said quickly then, flashing into impishness, "come, Jeremy, let us show these brats how Grandma and Grandpa Quail can drift away into the lovers' waltz."

VI

Uncle Erasmus could have made the announcement at the Victory Ball overnight, but it had never been his way to do the obvious and he had not lost his sense of the dramatic, his boy's delight in playing a game, so that we were told to appear at the meeting-place at dawn.

We obeyed, to find him sitting there on the great rock, lolling quietly, big arms resting on the stones on either side which made the throne an easy chair.

The day was coming in, bright and new, crimson and gold in the eastern sky, mirrored more softly and beautifully in the west. The air was light and young, as if it were something created whilst we slept after the excitements of the night. The pines stretched out their arms, and the stream laughed silver, and the birds awakened happily. It was the dawn; it was as near as we could ever be to To-morrow—and that was why Uncle Erasmus had chosen it.

He beckoned me.

"Boy," he said, "beat the gong."

And there down below him was the gong that had been pillaged from the Summer Palace in Peking. It was long since I had sounded it, but he did not have to tell me what note to strike. I beat it gaily, young again. I beat it as I had on that first night and it seemed to me, and to all of us who could remember, that Uncle Erasmus had been sitting quiet

and fatherly on the great pink rock through all the years between. The wheel turned, as he often said; the wheel came back to the same spot.

The skymen, though they killed people with bombs, stood away in the background, and watched with a kind of reverence. I think, perhaps, only my uncle could have imposed that reverence on those young men who knew terrible things, though they were oddly gentle and wise.

We waited as the last mellow notes went booming away into the aisles of pines, and Uncle Erasmus, at the precise moment, took up the very note and spoke to us.

"Good friends and dear," said Uncle Erasmus, voice deep as the gong's, but very quiet and kind, "there is a parable for us in the little brown hens. There were thousands of them when we came wishing them no harm, those gentle and lovable and harmless hens. We came from the world outside, bringing rats and cats, for which they were not prepared. To-day the little brown hens are no more, though the cats remain to kill the rats and the rats remain to win their living as rats must. I would not take your minds back to sad pages in our history—those Germans and the brown pair we succoured from the sea—but I fear I must. The Great Death. There, children!—I leave it at that. Your hearts know the rest.

"Now we are gentle and lovable and harmless as the little brown hens, but we are dying off. Each time the world touches us we learn that we can only stay alive if we stay outside the world. That is not possible. These nice young chaps who have found us now are the final proof.

"Although we didn't know it, or you didn't, we were very brave when we set out into the emptiness of the Pacific seeking the Promised Land. I was not brave, because I had a childish and absolute faith in the Lord. You and your fathers and grandfathers were brave because they put their trust in me—a mere man. But they were wise to trust their hearts because they were not trusting me, but the God I trusted.

"Enough of yesterday. That has become our bugbear here." He paused and tugged his beard, and gestured to the flushing sky. "To-day, To-morrow, these are our concerns now. I am no wiser than when I led you out into the blue wilderness of the Pacific, but I have the same counsel. I have

been shown, as you must have known in your hearts, that we cannot do without the world, that we cannot escape from the world. Then the thing to do is to be brave again, and to follow the simple instincts of the heart. It may not be wise, it may not be even sensible in view of all we have avoided since you and your forebears sent the tug *Powerful* back to Sydney empty, but I say to you, now we in our wisdom must reach out and take what we need of the world."

We were there below him, as we had been when he spoke from the poop of the *Quail* with the sunset behind him. Once again he towered up, a tree of a man, broad of chest and slim of waist, still wearing the wide, gold-starred belt about his thin hips, but as we looked at him now he was a golden man with the dawn of a new day for background, not a sunset.

That is why I say, yet again, and as a grandfather, that he was the greatest man in the world, and I humbly proud to be his powder-monkey. For there was neither time nor birthdays for Uncle Erasmus, and that is how a man should be.

Anybody else would have started to work up to his main point, but not my uncle. Suddenly he lounged back, and lost his earnestness, and took out his meerschaum pipe and the silver box which had outlasted his pouch. Once, in the days when he was seeking the Daybreak strike, it had had advertising printed on it and been just an ordinary tobacco tin. It shone now, fine and thin, as if it had been shaped by a silver-smith instead of merely polished by his great, gentle hands. He filled his pipe slowly.

"There was an impudent boy among us once," he said, conversationally, "who would have said Quack! Quack! about now. Most of you wouldn't remember him, but he was always a great brake on my eloquence. Quack! Quack! he'd say. A funny little boy, who died for us in the Great Death. But that is Yesterday again. We are concerned with To-morrow."

And, having lit his pipe from the fungus-brazier at his side, he leaned forward again, smiling in his beard.

"Ah, now, children—To-morrow!" he said on a quick, jubilant note, "To-morrow is going to be fun. We shall march on. March on? No, there has been too much marching. We shall skip on, we shall dance on. In a matter of an hour or less I shall be leaving you. There is a nasty job to be done, but I am the only one for it. I am going back

to the world, briefly, because it is my task, and just as the world has come and found us, so I shall find the world.

"Do not think I go reluctantly—do not think it won't be fun. I wouldn't fool you; I wouldn't make you think I was a martyr. It is an adventure. I shall find in the world new people to call to the Promised Land, even though there will be many in the innocence of their hearts, who, having lived through the world of which these young chaps have told us, believe that now all will be well. Those, naturally, will not be my concern. But there will be others as there were before. Oh be sure, there will be others! Those I will find.

"But that is not all. I know now what we need. We need many tricks and toys they have out there. These I shall bring back. And greater things. We need a priest who is also a teacher. A young priest. There is a lack of the true godliness here in those who will lead when I am gone." I knew he meant me, and I flushed, but all attention centred on him. "Also our present teacher has served long and well enough. She is going to retire and become my wife on my return."

He didn't have to mention Aunt Grace's name, but at this announcement everybody suddenly burst out cheering and clapping, in the way we always had from the very beginning when Uncle Erasmus had tidings which were welcome.

"I am going," he said, with a chuckle, when the noise died down, "to bring back, among many other things, a trousseau for Grace Paterson."

My Aunt Grace, for whom no moment was too big, had dropped a deep curtsy to the honest applause. Now she rose out of it, sure and lovely on her little feet, and she looked up at him, so pert and pretty, her lips curly.

"Erasmus," she said, as if they were talking with nobody listening, "you are a great man and I love you, but I will not have you choose my trousseau. I have made my own arrangements."

She had always been the one to take my uncle aback. I laughed silently in glee.

"Girl," said Uncle Erasmus, glowering down, "what do you mean? How could you have made your own arrangements? You had no hint of my plans, no idea."

"No, Erasmus," said Aunt Grace, and I caught Naomi's

eye and we enjoyed the moment, "not a hint from you. But I shall never need that. I'm so much cleverer than you, Erasmus—except in running Quail Island, of course. Lofty Taylor has a sister. He's shown me a snapshot of her, and told me all about her. Her name's Ann-Marie. Ann-Marie is older than your Lofty and so much more civilized. She is choosing my trousseau. Lofty has the letter in his pocket with full instructions, and Ann-Marie—she runs a lingerie shop—will call on you for funds. Thank you, my love."

She dropped him the hint of a curtsy, more impudence than gratitude.

I would have been covered with embarrassment, but Uncle Erasmus was as much a man as Aunt Grace was a woman. He blew a leisurely plume of smoke from his great brown pipe.

"This is very thoughtful of you, my dear," he said, "to save a busy man trouble, but to return to less important matters. We are going to be linked with the world in future, but linked in my way. I shall have no excursion steamers, at ten pounds a time, calling here. Our young and wise friends, Lofty and Shorty and their crew, are, I should say, as good as out of employment now. They are, if I may make a rough guess, looking for what might be called post-war jobs. I have arranged to give them those jobs. I shall buy a flying boat, and that shall be our link through the clean sky. In our day the schooner was right; in this day, the flying boat."

At that we cheered again, for we had come to love the ships that flew and the men who flew them.

My uncle laughed deep down.

"Mind," he said, "my flying boat will be a far better job than these Sunderlands. They're old stuff," he said, imitating our guests, "they're obsolete. I shall demand much better from the out-of-work factories. You think of me as one to whom money doesn't matter, who keeps a few hundred sovereigns in his chest. No, no, children, that is the pretty chickenfeed, the toy money. The real wealth from the Day-break is lodged in the bank to be paid back to Australia, from whence I won it, in a hundred years, unless I claim any portion of it in the meantime. So you may know we can afford the very best of flying machines. I only hope the men I am employing won't be too much that-old-war to fly it."

We laughed, of course, but it was odd to see how the skymen

from Mars laughed, too. He played on them as he did on us; in a few short days, for everything they had, they were his marionettes as much as we were.

"Boy," my uncle burst out, "boy, where is that Ancient? Boy, bring me my rum and my banjo."

Nobody but Uncle Erasmus would have called for such things at that moment. I looked about, startled but eager, as if I had been on the schooner. And there, behind the gong, was the banjo, and the bottle of rum the skymen had brought, with a glass ready alongside. Uncle Erasmus always knew how to arrange things; he always saw many moves ahead.

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said, and I poured the dregs of the miracle bottle into the glass, and I handed it up to him with his banjo.

"Thank you, boy," he said, and took a gulp and bent lovingly over the ancient instrument. "Long ago, before most of you were born, there was a chance to go back to the world next day in the tug *Powerful*. Then I played this song to wring your hearts with yesterday. Now I shall play the song to gladden your hearts for to-morrow. Because 'Home, Sweet Home' is Quail Island, and I—a nasty, bossy, arrogant old man—shall leave it with tears in my eyes, and only be happy when I am home again with you in the dear isle the dear Lord gave us."

And Uncle Erasmus, quite simply, like a child, heart on sleeve, bent over his banjo, and, plucking unhandily, sang "Home, Sweet Home" to us in a voice which was less than ever like Mr. Caruso's. Once upon a time the lost things of the cities had come reaching out to us across the empty waters, crying after us, tugging us back, so that we wept, but now we knew that the green hills and the pines and the cliffs and the beaches and the stream of our island, and the sea about it, and the cabins and the fields we had made, were our home, and that Uncle Erasmus was the luckless one, going away in the fine and great and marvellous ship that flew, back to the terrible world out there for our sakes and for the sake of simple souls who didn't even know that Quail Island was on the face of the globe.

All I could see, and that dimly, was Aunt Grace and my Naomi smiling fondly at Uncle Erasmus through their tears which were bright in the early sunlight.

He gave us one verse and the chorus, and then flung his banjo aside and drained the very last drop of the rum.

"Now," he said, briskly, "we must be off."

He put one hand on the stone and vaulted down, like a youngster.

At that moment—and be sure my uncle had arranged it—the skymen, quiet in the background, produced things like clumsy pistols and fired into the air.

Rockets went whizzing up, with a hiss of black smoke, and burst into bright drifting stars in the clear sky.

It was such a surprise that we burst out laughing.

He could always make us cry or laugh.

"Come, boy," he said then, briskly, "don't stand mooning about. We must be going."

"We, sir, Uncle Erasmus?" I gasped, more startled than I had ever been in all my life.

"Would you send me out into that wicked, troubled world without my powder-monkey, my Ancient?" he said, laying his great hand on my shoulder. "Boy, I thought better of you than that."

"No, sir!— Yes, sir!" I answered, not knowing what I was trying to say.

"Oh, Jeremy! Fun—such fun!" Naomi cried, wild with glee.

"But——?" said I. "But——?"

"You go with Mr. Uncle to bring back the world to us," said Naomi. "How lovely! How lucky you are!"

"But like this?—with no luggage, no warning?"

"Luggage—warning—fiddlesticks!" scoffed Uncle Erasmus. "Come, Ancient. Kiss your sweetheart as I kiss mine, and let's be away on the new adventure."

He gathered Aunt Grace up in the hug of a gentle and reverent bear, and Naomi was in my arms, glowing, delighted, body smooth and firm as a sapling.

VII

Through the glass of the porthole, I looked back at Quail Island, in a matter of minutes grown so remote. The pines stood sentinel, the gulls whirled and the parrots flashed. The

youngsters had fallen back a bit, leaving by the water's edge the older people like Naomi and Aunt Grace and Petersen and little old lame Mrs. Hawthorne and the rest who had made the voyage in the three-masted schooner *Quail*. They looked like toy figures, dolls. And as I watched, they knelt down on that familiar beach to pray for us who went forth from the Promised Land.

With a roar like a hurricane the engines started up, and the silver swan shuddered into life. Pulsing and throbbing it swept across the calm waters of our bay, and the sea drenched the glass before my eyes, forming rainbows. Then we were climbing the sky, and I couldn't see Quail Island any more but only the empty blue of space.

"Boy," said Uncle Erasmus at my elbow, "that Naomi of yours was right as usual. This is fun! He works in a mysterious way——!"

Uncle Erasmus chuckled like a giant schoolboy—a school-boy outside time.

"Yes, sir, Uncle Erasmus," I said.

The flying boat dipped and dropped, like the schooner when the gale struck her, only worse. Uncle Erasmus paled.

"My stomach, oh, my stomach!" he groaned. "Ancient, a cat chases a rat in my stomach. These young fellows should have warned me. Who would ever have thought——? Indeed, I love Quail Island and its people to have undertaken this wretched venture. There is no peace, no comfort, away from our island home. The fumes! The motion! The reek of oil! Boy, I must lie down, and I shall probably die."

But I knew he wouldn't die—not my Uncle Erasmus.

THE END

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